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# Grand Narrative Questioned in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions

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**Abstract:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in, *The Palace of Illusions* portray a different image of Draupathi, the princess of Panchaal, the daughter of King Dhruvad and the wife of the five Pandavas. The author in her work highlights epic through the eyes and mouthpiece of Panchali. Panchali is here, voice of the current work. The writer writes her poignant work, hearing stories about magic and illusions, about great epics and legends, about religion, politics, and relationships during her childhood. She takes her inspiration from the great epic Mahabharata, which is believed to take place during the *Dvapara Yuga*. Mahabharata is a fascinating tale of apsaras and asuras. It has many mythological tales of heroes and their valour. In the current study deals with the post-modernist perspective through the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard. The postmodernist believes, that these grand narratives which function in a way, that they become a totalizing factor in determining the myths, legends and tales and provide legitimation for the same. He then believes that these grand narratives become an overarching umbrella for the stories and hide the facts and pieces of information which are as valid as the narratives.

**Keywords:** Lyotard, Post-modernism, Grand Narrative, Draupathi, Mahabharata.

The Indian epics are sagas, which highlight values, traditions, culture, family relationships and ethnicity of India. The epics, Ramayana or Mahabharata teach us value or importance of *dharma* and *karma*. These epics are the backbone of Indian culture and tradition which highlight mythological stories of the past. The mythological stories are often about valour and bravery, heroes of past, stories of myths and legends, of magic and illusions, about great kingdoms which emerged and perished. These epics organise thoughts in totality.

The epics provide one with *ithihas*, elaborating all the happenings of the past as well as teachings of dharma, arth, karma and moksha. Epics anchors the situations of life providing, one solutions. Ramayana and Mahabharata are amalgamation of paths of truth which will lead one to salvation. They are the core philosophy of Hinduism which people of south Asia follow as their philosophical treatise. The two mahakavyas were ideals to civilization as they include important discourse of that period. The virtue of Mahabharata, when compared to the Vedas, is the history which the Vedas are not. History includes the stories of the past, of all the happening that occurred.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in, *The Palace of Illusions* portray a different image of Draupathi, the princess of Panchaal, the daughter of King Dhruvad and the wife of the five Pandavas. The author in her work highlights epic through the eyes and mouthpiece of Panchali. Panchali is here, voice of the current work. The writer writes her poignant work, hearing stories about magic and illusions, about great epics and legends, about religion, politics, and relationships during her childhood. She takes her inspiration from the great epic Mahabharata, which is believed to take place during the *Dvapara Yug*. Mahabharata is a fascinating tale of apsaras and asuras. It has many mythological tales of heroes and their valour. The writer in her work, in the author's note writes:

*...listening to the stories of the Mahabharata as a young girl in the lantern-lit evenings at my grandfather's village home, or later poring over the thousand-page leather-bound volume in my parent's home in Kolkata, I was left unsatisfied by the portrayal of the women. (xiv)*

The epic includes powerful women characters like Kunti, the mother of Pandavas who bought up her sons alone after the death of her husband Pandu, the other is Gandhari, who lived

a life of a blindfold, after her marriage with Drishrashtra. There is Uttara, wife of Abhimanyu who faced a difficult pregnancy during the time of war and lost her husband in it. The story of Hidamba is no less who sacrificed her only son to the war. Mahabharata is not only the tale of brave heroes but heroines too, who are put underneath, where their importance and sacrifice is never highlighted. Then there is, the fire born Draupathi, the daughter of Drupad who was married to the five Pandavas at the same time. The women played a vital role in the battle of *Kuruvansh*. Though they do not find a place, as important as the Pandavas, they seem to remain hidden in the history of the greatest dynasty. These women do need a platform where their valour, as great as our heroes, can be portrayed. Divakaruni, in the author's note writes:

*If I ever wrote a book...I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. ... I would have one of them tell it myself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. (xiv-xv)*

The writer therefore chooses Panchali as her heroine, through whom she has portrayed a different perspective of Mahabharata. It is through the eyes; of Panchali, that Divakaruni has built *The Palace of Illusions*. According to the Houston chronicle, "Panchali's narrative provides a radiant entrée into an ancient mythology virtually unknown to the Western world. Divakaruni's impulse to flesh out the women of the Mahabharata results in a charming and remarkable book."

*The Palace of Illusions* is Draupathi's Mahabharata, whose voice cannot be heard, it is her life that cannot be imagined, her questions that cannot be answered, and it's her vision that

the writer seeks to portray. In her masterpiece Divakaruni, has given a different and unique image of Draupathi, who questions everything on this earth, she cannot be static and bear everything that is put on her, she is a dark colour female, but the most beautiful one. She is a powerful voice to be heard, who will unfold the paths of history, born to, 'change the course of history'. (5)

In the initial epic women are portrayed as characters, who were meant to support their husbands and make sacrifices. They are helpless characters who are either bound to their duties as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters or bound to the supernatural wordings. The writers provides a voice to Draupathi, and her tale of agony, remorse, love, hate, revenge, pain, distrust and sorrow through her own mouth. She could thus be a collective voice of many women from history who were deprived to make any voice. The writer by writing this work is providing Draupathi a platform, through which she can substantiate and justify her actions and her role in the great epic.

Born from holy fire, with her brother Dhrishtadyumna (Dhri), Draupathi is the daughter of king Drupad. Her name also suggests or means the daughter of Drupad. She has a beautiful and emotional bound with her brother and wants to seek and learn everything that her brother does. Though she is given only domestic education, she is able to learn certain things like the art of war or political subjects through Dhri. Draupathi is a curious child, a rebellious rather who wants to have a life of her own, made out of her own choices. She is made to learn feminine way of living which she opposes and likes to sit with her brother when he is given formal education. Panchali is different from all the girls and women in her palace, she is dark skinned and has different ways of life, due to these reasons she was sometimes disliked and ignored by the majority.

The only pillars of her are Dhri and Dhai Ma in the huge mausoleum, to whom she could trust and believe. Draupathi grew into a beautiful princess. As she grew; the curiosity grew more inside her. She began to wonder and ask questions about why the highest purpose of woman is to support her husband or why do kings get more wives when they promise to love the first one? She is a precarious character, a female voice who longs for acceptance in the society. The novel by Divakaruni is in the form of questions that she, through the character of Draupathi asks the wide world. A world which is patriarchal in nature, works according to a system, where a female gender is always at question of identity.

Draupathi is a fiery voice, where she lives among warriors, magic, gods, prophecies and often finds herself trapped by the hands of fate. Fate plays an important part in life of Draupathi where she being, symbol of individualism, is often manipulated by the hands of fate. Fate plays a vital role in governing destinies and portions of characters. 'Destiny is strong and swift. You can't trick it so easily. Even if you hadn't come seeking it today, in time it would have found you'. (39-40) Draupathi's life is pre-determined by fate where she is bound to marry five husbands and see the calamity of war. It is an assumed philosophy through ages that the war of Kurukshetra is due to Draupathi, as she avenges Kauravas.

Is her insult an only reason? Veda Vysa therefore warns Draupathi before her marriage, that 'when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse' (40) Is Vysa trying to tell Draupathi to remain quit at the time, she is striped in front of all, is he trying to tell her to bear all the sham, pain, agony to extenuate the catastrophe. One should look at all the possible reasons that might have led to the Great War and not just Draupathi alone. Sikhandi another warrior of her time tells Draupathi, 'wait for a man to avenge your honor, and you'll wait forever' (49).

If Draupathi, being given subject hood and agency, as Gayatri Spivak rightly says in her subaltern studies, she would have fought her battle alone. Through the centuries, male writers have been proxy for women, where a woman is defined through a male pen. The female writers were not recognised in the world of writing and men become 'political proxy' for women. Similarly Vysa become a proxy for the princess of Panchal, as we find a voice of her through the writer of Mahabharata, who glorified men of history but forgot women of history.

Jean-François Lyotard, defines postmodern condition as, 'incredulity towards metanarratives' where he sets number of debates regrading narrative systems through which human society gives meaning or universality or integrity to experiences. Lyotard in his essay on The Post Modern condition says:

*To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on.*

The postmodernist believes, that these grand narratives which function in a way, that they become a totalizing factor in determining the myths, legends and tales and provide legitimation for the same. He then believes that these grand narratives become an overarching umbrella for the stories and hide the facts and pieces of information which are as valid as the narratives. Linda Hutcheon believes, 'the role and function of metanarratives in our discourses of knowledge is one that

demands our attention'. This attention seeks to draw our attention towards these myths and legends which provide or give them validation to be true. This compromise attitude of inevitably politics, make the unfamiliar familiar to us. Hutcheon further adds:

*'In response to the question of metanarrative, postmodernism's stand is one of wanting to contest cultural dominants (patriarchy, capitalism, humanism, etc.) and yet knowing it cannot extricate itself from them: there is no position outside these metanarratives from which to launch a critique that is not in itself compromised.'*

The epic is conglomeration of teachings and values of diverse culture of India and wisdom of Krishna. It is all about how valorous Pandavas defeated Kauravas through their strengths, beliefs, wisdom, knowledge and power. This Great legend serves as Grand Narrative where it over arches all 'petit receipts'. Under these grand narratives or beneath these grand narratives lie number of facts and figures and then the most important the Princess of Panchali. Patriarchy is also one of hidden questions that underlie grand narrative.

The work of Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* portrays hidden facts under overarching frame of narratives. The first being, even a Princess born out of fire has to bare the crucial question of identity, in society. During the birth of Draupathi, she came of fire most unexpectedly, 'Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic?' (5) Even the meaning of her name, is 'daughter of Drupad' where a girl is considered a property of a father husband respectively. Draupathi after her marriage is to live in unbearable conditions. She has no privacy in her palace, and is in much control of her father.

The second one, marriage for a girl makes her lose everything, her comfortable environment, her dreams and aspirations and



many more things. The word marriage is nothing more than banishment to a no where land. Being a Princesses, after her marriage she has to leave her Kingdome, her luxuries, and is made to follow her husband Arjuna. She is even made to wake bare feet. 'My feet were bleeding. I'd never walked barefoot on common streets, over thorns and stones...' (98) She is now in hands of her husbands and follows their path to wooden hut inside the forest.

The third narrative would be, being most beautiful of all, she was not able to live to her standards. There is a stigma attached to the Indian custom regarding the skin colour. Dark skin is considered as non-wanted and evil. Divakaruni has presents Draupathi as a girl having dark skin but a beautiful one. On the pretext of society, Lord Krishna is praised for his beauty being dark. On the other side Draupathi being female is compelled to think of herself as 'a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that people termed it blue'.

The fourth one, where Draupathi is claimed by five men as their wife, an act of brutality, glorified through ages. Polyandry is highlighted by many authors of Indian Literature where a woman is married to many husbands. There are real life Draupathi, existing today where fraternal polyandry is still practised in interior of Indian communities and remote Himalayas.

The power in marriage is always seen in hands of a male, a husband. The fifth narrative is regarding same fact. In the game of dice after Yudhishtra lost everything, even himself and his four brothers. He now pawns wife Draupathi in game of dice, shows how female gender is controlled by opposite sex. 'Power is the ability to control others or one's entity. Accordingly, it can be defined as a kind of strength'. (Bartleyby.com) The power is something, which 'comes from everywhere', according to the French theorist Foucault. Power exerts itself on subjects which are supported by knowledge.

Power is never tangible nor it is in someone's hands but it is something that works in our imagination and encumbers one in a way she or he acts. Draupathi thus questions ...'If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife'. (190)

Obsession with virginity is other aspect of sixth narrative. Draupathi has to bear extreme pain of having her hymen break. The myth of 'communal drinking cup' is again attached to Ved Vyas, where he provides a boon to Draupathi. The boon was that every time Draupathi lives with one of her five husbands her virginity will be restored. Draupathi wonders whether boon was for her, proves obsession with women's virginity.

'My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not'. (120)

The novel written in first person narrative portrays Draupathi, as an independent, strong powerful woman, who is equal to men of her society. Divakaruni presents her novel, as her interpretation of the epic where she gives to women powerful voice and feminist reading of her work.

Feminist reading of works include questioning patriarchy, phallogocentric ideologies, dominant gender and many other areas where women are subjugated, suppressed and dominated. It challenges the traditions which exist for females, also feminist reading attack writings by male pen. 'Women and jewels are common property,' says Jayadrata to Draupathi. He further adds:

*A woman is to have one husband, a man many wives... woman may have a second husband through Niyoga for progeny in case of difficulty. A woman having a third one has to undergo*

*expiation, if she has a fourth one she becomes an outcaste and one having a fifth one is a harlot (90).*

In R.K.Narayan's *The Indian Epics Retold*, Yudhishtira describes Panchali as, 'the goddess Lakshmi herself in stature, grace and complexion; eyes like lotus petals; a woman who is an ideal wife to guide, serve and sustain a man at all times' (260). The two sentences one by Jayadrata and the other in the novel of R.K. Narayan describe the status of a wife.

*The Palace of Illusions* is about Draupathi, the one, 'who wasn't invited'. It is about women when they were considered as only child bearers, giving heir to kingdoms. Draupathi is a curious child who wants to know everything she encounters in her daily life. She thinks about girls who get married to old kings as soon as they mature, and how they are kept away from all public affairs. She chooses to be different and chooses a different life for herself, under care of Dai Ma and her elder brother Dhri she learns about the world.

Divakaruni presents women as equal to men in society. She urges women to be heroines and not bound to be only daughters and wives. The original epic is all about men and their valour. The society of the time functioned in a way where individuality of women was out of question, where they were bound to four walls of palaces. The original epic becomes grand narrative, which has a totalizing effect on society. Lyotard thus, attacks emancipation as a whole and grand narrative which serves to enlighten society. The post-modernist re-examines the thought of enlightenment similarly Divakaruni re-examines the original epic. Lyotard talks about knowledge in the terms of narratives, our understanding of the world is based on various discourses that we are a part of. There are numerous ways of experiencing it.

The grand narratives are governing principles which brings together different narratives. These narratives produce a

systematic account though which the world works and form their ideas and principles. They construct account of human society and processes, where the development of knowledge takes place. This knowledge, as Lyotard believes has now become a commodity and a means of empowerment. He further believes that the knowledge communicated through these grand narratives is interpreted differently by the world. The grand narratives are thus authoritative forming or establishing cultural and political, absolute truths which are beyond the means of serious examinations. These grand narratives have totalizing and overarching effect on the culture, reducing them to be universal codes which take control to the local narratives.

In a culture driven by grand narratives, the ideology of the predominant essentially has a monopoly on knowledge, which Lyotard opposes by calling for a new world of knowledge based on mini narratives. Mini narratives do not contain any universal truths but together they form a body of knowledge more adept at describing the contemporary condition than the generalizing ideologies of grand narratives (Lyotard 4)

The culture in which one lives is drawn by grand narratives, in India the two great epics serve as grand narratives which have the monopoly of knowledge on the people. The two epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana have predominantly controlling ideology. Foucault believes that through an ideology people are driven into a thinking which further makes them as individuals and who become the vehicle to pass the ideologies constructed within discourse. These ideologies function in a system through power. Power executes through ways, in which an individual is placed. Power determines the position of an individual which operates within a social circle.

The mini narratives as Lyotard believes, 'are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local

circumstances'. Mini narratives do not hold any bases for universal truths but form solid body of knowledge which is hidden under the overarching umbrella of grand narratives. Therefore Lyotard opines that 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility' (Lyotard, 1984, 37) and he further praises the temporary and local knowledge of mini narratives.

The author has looked beyond the umbrella and gathered knowledge which is essential as a part of history. She has highlights voice of Draupathi which remains absent in the original one, she has looked for the female voice which is generally silenced. The work is an important dig into past portraying that the Great War was just a complete destruction where the Pandavas were left to rule a land of blood.

The Post Modern Condition is Lyotard's intellectual discourse where he has written about the status of knowledge in contemporary world. In his opening sentence, Lyotard writes that the book is concerned with:

*'The condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.'* (Ibid. xxii) That is to distinguish the condition of knowledge from the general cultural condition of postmodernism, which he defines in the crudest sense as 'incredulity toward metanarratives', (Ibid. xxiv) and reveals how Knowledge has, up until the end of the 1950's (Ibid. 3)

Lyotard further believes that the working of our hypothesis is the position of knowledge where it is changed or altered as our societies enter the age of postmodern. Knowledge is the product of narratives. The post-modernist talks about cultural and scientific narratives. Cultural narratives are denotative statements which portray how to live, how to listen, how to eat. These cultural narratives give rules to people. Therefore society is bounded by these cultural narratives and society has legitimacy, and therefore legitimation becomes a matter of

power. These epics have the power of legitimation where they govern the subjects through power of knowledge. Mahabharata has therefore governed people from ages where one has never looked beyond this grand narrative.

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