

## Replication of the Cultural Scripts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer who migrated to America from West Bengal. Though settled down in the new land, she sees the country India as her native village where she had spent her early days of life. This is the connection of the writer to her native land. She visits her place Kolkata as a place of her olden roots with her American husband. Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* talks of the social conditioning of a woman who descends her positioning in the cultural paradigm. She also talks of the significance of cultural scripts, which provokes a woman to negotiate her with space created through undergoing agency. The agency helps the society to have the desired result. Under the paradigm of discourse literary assignments correct the agenda from time to time. Through her text, Divakaruni tends to establish that the migration in the life of a woman is very

significant as it liberates her from tradition as well as scripts. The new land's experience generates fluid of renegotiation which can be accessible only after abolishing the olden, traditional space. Jasbir Jain posits the condition of a woman who wants to be diasporic, "wishes to renegotiate both the cultures simultaneously primarily because it is not possible to relate to the new reality without altering inherited constructs. You simply cannot relocate them as they are" (Jasbir Jain *Writing Women Across Cultures*, 141).

**Keywords:** Cultural scripts, fluid of identity, affirmation, myth, legend, history, tradition and modernity, *Mahabharata*, social structure and political agency.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* constructs the story through a mythical as well as historical character, Panchali, the wife of five Pandava brothers about a woman born in patriarchal system. Divakaruni basically deals with the life of women characters who suffer from their identity crisis. Like Panchali, there are a number of characters who are either silent or being silenced in the text. It is an assumption that one who doesn't speak for herself but accepts everything being said by the society is appreciated. The characters taken for analysis may be related to the great epic *The Mahabharata* yet they have their relevance in social and cultural paradigm of the society. The writer has made every attempt to bridge the vacuum of tradition and modernity. The book is also significant for its presentation of olden history of the country India.

Though the book *The Palace of Illusions* is a mythical as well as historical text yet the writer has given a humanistic touch to

the whole script. At one level, it deals with the life of Kaurava and Pandava's familial story and their complex relationship. But, the writer has analysed that characters based on common man's life and sees the resistance. She has also studied that how the olden traditional rules and rituals are powerful even today and responding to the mythical era's culture. Divakaruni has analysed the character of Panchali with the patriarchal ideology where a woman is considered inferior to the man in every precept of life. Every concept is relative to her life. There is a popular folkway in south India that 'A woman with long hair spells destruction for her husband.' So, the young woman is appreciated to reduce their hair in south India even today. Women had to sacrifice their life for the future husband.

Draupadi has been portrayed negative in the social discourse and no one finds it attractive to name their daughters after her. Such girls are known to be a kritiya, one who brings doom to her clan. But, Divakaruni has analysed the character of Panchali with full zeal and sanctity. She sees Panchali as one of the powerful and independent character who fights for her liberation. She affirms her individuality and self-esteem. Panchali's character has been played as role-performer who loses her to his opponent in a game of dice. Subsequently, opponent people made every effort to harass Panchali by removing her sari. This harassment was not less than sexual harassment or abuse. She was not given help by any one. Thus, this harassment is a reflection of male supremacy. She proves herself courageous when she constantly fights with the opponents. She is not the only character who fights or sacrifices but there are other powerful characters in the novel such as Kunti, Gandhari and many more had single aim to play

their role in significant manner. Kunti devoted her life to help the Pandava brothers to become royal kings. Gandhari also decided that she would put her eyes closed in order to pay respect to her husband. She was the mother of Kaurava brothers. From these examples, it is proved that these women were least concerned about themselves rather they place others' wellbeing higher. Divakaruni has touched the spirit of a woman which was hidden behind the great epic of *The Mahabharata*. Panchali could feel sufferings of her life when she was advised to marry Arjuna instead of Karna as Karna does not belong to the Kshatriya tradition. This is the political agency through the scripts that validates and convinces the identity to accommodate and adopt. Panchali was determined to receive the love of her choice but she could not have been succeeded in her goal. Finally, she had no clues to decide which option would be better for her. She extended her feelings towards the Kshatriyas tradition without having affirmation of her self-will. She accepted the then validated social fabric of the time. So, we could say that the scripts are not only the image of transferring the vehicle of interest from one strand of life to another but they are also having the enough potential to validate the positioning of social discourse. Generally, women undergo a great emotional upheaval through different stages of their life; childhood to old age. They need social support and an honourable place of their own, so these pathological tools contribute in the form of justification. Nowadays, counselling places are the extended artefacts to affirm the position of a woman. Panchali's character can be analysed at different stages and one of the methods can be of her putting a bridge between tradition and

modernity. Her character is so relevant today as we can feel in the women's life. Parental homes are advisable to give her potential to her personality but she did not find as the homes are also guided by the same system. The contemporary feminists have articulated their views in this direction.

Simone de Beauvoir has also defined the 'woman' and her identity in the social discourse how has been taken and considered and she says:

*Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: 'He is male!' The term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex. (The Second Sex 35)*

Panchali feels disheartened in *The Palace of Illusions* and asks few questions from her "Who would I marry? Would I ever be mistress of my own home? Would I find love? Were these the kinds of desires hidden in my heart? How puerile they were, things my maids might have wanted! It was mortifying thought."(42-43) Pandu got married with Madri, a beautiful lady, she was her second wife the first was Kunti. Pandu was cursed by a Brahmin that if Pandu touched a woman in desire, he would perish. Pandu left the palace and went to forest Kunti where Madri also accompanied him. One day Pandu embraced Madri with an intention of desire and soon after he died. The approach I have taken to justify my argument is that the women are sufferer in every part of relationship; it may be

either a matter of their recognition or sacrifice. Panchali is also a sufferer in spite of having devotedness towards her relationships. Panchali likes Karna but she could not fulfil her feelings because Karna does not belong to the Kshatriya clan so he was not given permission to attend the *swayamvara*. *Swayamvara* is thrown on the life of Draupadi to select the best match out of given number of people where her own match/love cannot appear. This is the irony of the whole *swayamvara* festival. Divakaruni has dealt this aspect with a girl like any other who has not given her freedom of expression. Though the writer has taken the subject from *The Mahabharata* a great epic of the Hindu scriptures yet she has made every effort to make the realization humanly and related to every human heart.

Draupadi and her feelings are shaped through patriarchal settings where Draupadi is confined to the story of sacrifice and spiritual awakening. Divakaruni's women experience love, loss and longing through bitter tastes of the world they struggle for. Scriptures are so powerfully established in our cultural paradigms that one cannot challenge and overcome them easily. Myth and history gives new voice to Panchali which subverts her positioning under the present socio-cultural paradigms. Chitra has noticed an emotional upheaval through the character of Panchali when she enacts her feelings:

*I was fascinated by Krishna because I couldn't decipher him. I fancied myself an astute observer of people and had already analyzed the other important people in my life. My father was obsessed by pride and the dream of getting even. He had absolute*

*notions of right and wrong adhered to them rigidly. (This made him a fair ruler, but not a beloved one.) His weakness was that he cared too much about what people might say about the royal house of Panchaal....He was overly protective of me (but I forgave him that). His weakness was that he believed completely in his destiny and had resigned himself to fulfilling it. (11)*

So, there is still a question in my mind how a woman should be viewed or recognised in public foray as well as cultural scripts if we do not have space for them. Panchali is culprit of the society or the representative of the social system. We should ask such questions from ourselves: Do we accept her in cultural and social foray or not? Do we need to change her sphere? There is a hotly but overt misconception about it in the text. We do not wish to relocate her positioning through the myth. Myth cannot be an ideal image or an ultimate identity of a woman. She should have her own address and identity. We find two addresses of Panchali: one, she is the daughter of Panchal, a royal king of an Indian province and two, she is the wife of the Pandava brothers which is also considered an abuse to someone if you call her Panchali. Hence, Panchali shifts her identity from one space to other but she fails to establish her own horizon where she can fly in the open sky. This is the problem that has been raised in *The Palace of Illusions*.

Myth, legend and history are the artefacts to carry the information from one cultural space to another but their role becomes more significant when they represent the contemporary society. They represent the image of the social as well as cultural fabric of the society. People decode the

meanings through the text developed in the concerned cultural scripts. Divakaruni has also decoded that meanings through the signs and images and enacted with the humanistic touch. Panchali represents the myth and image of the contemporary society.

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