



Exploration of Femininity and Plurality through Draupadi's Narratives in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*

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Abstract:

The rewriting of the Indian epics has become one of the prevalent modes of writing fiction. By rewriting the great epics, the texts that were so far presented in a male voice are subverted and presented from the female perspective. Women in such novels are generally identified through their external actions and dialogues. But when presented as the narrator of a known story, the formerly shadowed characters would be cast in a different light. Apart from the story, the internal and hidden motives, fantasies and vengeance would be brought to the forefront. The following research article explores the femininity of the narrator as well as other female characters exploring plural voices in the retold epics.

Key words: Femininity, first-person narration, plurality, stream of consciousness.

Polyphony is a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, which means multiple voices with respect to music. Bakhtin's major analysis regarding the multiple voices in a narrative is based on the psychological novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. These voices are not subordinated to the voice of the author and are not merged into a single perspective. The author does not place his own narrative voice between the character and the reader, but allow characters to engage and surprise the audience. There is plurality of consciousness held together by the author's voice. The readers are able to see how reality appears to each character through polyphony.

Many recent and not-so-recent studies have given us great insight into the nature of the frame tale – particularly how a switch in narrative voice gives us multiple perspectives from which to think about the unfolding scene... We struggle with the idea of 'character development' in the epics, but we may have turned a blind eye to the ways in which selves might be constructed through dialogue itself. (Patton 98)

Though the primary narration of the two novels is offered by Draupadi, the Pandava queen, the other characters, along with her evolve through their dialogues of mixed emotions. A reader would be able to perceive a character as good or bad only through their conversations with other men and women involved in the plot. Krishna's characterization as an 'avatar' is not convincingly justified by the eulogies of the narrator or the other characters alone. Rather, it is through his own words that the readers come to know of his great vision and an irrevocable zeal to uphold the cause of dharma on earth. This would be the true evidence of characterization, delivered by the character himself that calls for the recognition of Krishna as someone divine.

Similarly, each character is approved as virtuous or vicious for it is their own words that account for their credibility. The plurality of consciousness is tactfully retained by Divakaruni and Ray with equal opportunity given to the characters whose space in the novels outweighed the epic proper. The stories behind the rivalry of Drupad and Drona, being almost cooked up from various versions, Shikandi's birth secret is seen to gain significance when he lets out the truth himself. In such a case, the job of the narrator becomes relatively less important, for throughout the revelation, the figure of Shikandi is strongly fixed in the reader's mind with much sympathy.

First person point of view places the reader immediately into the mind of the narrator. It allows for intimate portrayal of thoughts and emotions. The readers are readily directed to the fears, hopes and despair of the narrator. A first-person narrative has the common quality of using the stream of consciousness technique. A person's thoughts and reactions to events are perceived as a continuous flow along with the actions between various characters. It renders the flow of numerous impressions like the physical, the visual, the associative, etc. It is the successful attempt of an author to capture the consciousness of his or her characters rather than restricting with only their rational thoughts.

The first person narration is found to be the least ambiguous since the information is rendered by a single voice. This aspect gives assurance regarding the reliability of the events narrated, though fiction in itself is considered unreliable or a figment of the author's imagination. In the words of Josip Novakovich, the first person narrative becomes a scrutiny of split personality, a hypocrite or liar. Since everyone fall into one or the other of those categories, this point of view often seems to be a perfect choice of narration.

Among the many advantages of using the first person is one where the voice of the narrator is chosen freely. The third person counterpart often tends to restrict the use of language in its best accuracy. The first person narrative has the freedom of employing native styles of speech, unofficial or even to the extent of wrong grammar to bring out authentic narrative voice.

An instance of a man (boy) telling a woman (mother) to be silent could be extracted from the famous epic by Homer. The story of *Odyssey* is much of his son Telemachus' growth into a man and the coming of age is brought to light through the first book of the poem.

As Penelope comes down of her private quarters into the great hall of the palace, to find a bard performing to the throngs of her suitors; he is singing about the difficulties the Greek heroes are having in reaching home. She is not amused, and in front of everyone she asks him to choose another, happier number. At which point young Telemachus intervenes "Mother, go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household." And off she goes back upstairs. (Beard 1)

The sense in which Telemachus means by speech as men's business is that of an authoritative public speech and not about chatting or gossiping which are believed to be more of a woman's pastime. In almost all the evidences recorded, woman's voice is not to be heard in public. Especially in the work of Homer, the prime duty of a man in development is "to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species" (Beard 1).

The epic world is found to be filled with male voices where the female hardly have any chance of discourse. They were forced to be muted forever due to their inadequacy of a language of their own. Women's exclusion from cultural dialogue for centuries together also has a part to play in their silence. To modify their inadequacy, Claudine Herrmann advocates women to become thieves of language – the theft being the only solution to the age long issue of recovering female voices. Herrmann derives a parallel of this theft with that of Prometheus stealing fire from heaven for the welfare of mankind.

The narrative style employed by Ray in *Yajnaseni* is more evocative and gripping as compared to *The Palace of Illusions*. The first chapter where Draupadi decides to recite her life story while climbing Mount Meru is reflective of the traditional epic's style of invocation. Instead of calling the muses to help narrate her tale, she prays to her 'sakha' Krishna for help. "...O Govind! Do not turn my mind and heart inert till my story is complete. Do not destroy my memory; do not give it into the hands of death. Only let me tell my story – standing at death's door this little I pray" (Ray 5). The entire narration is a flashback of the terrible events happened in her life which she recollects on being desperate after her five husbands had left her to suffer alone in attaining heavenly abode.

Draupadi is best fit as the primary narrator since she is connected to almost all the other characters present in the story. Her representation as a fully grown woman yet naive about the world in which she lives is an added advantage to the study of feminine qualities and attitude. Her transgressive and probing attitude could be interpreted as an outcome of the absence of a childhood in which the traditional social norms could have been smoothly taught to her.

Draupadi's narration is made objective and genuine by Ray in *Yajnaseni*. For instance, the description of her beauty when Draupadi rose out of the 'yajna' flame is described with an affirmation that those were not the words of her own pride or conceit, but they are the true utterances of the court poets, who sang in praise of her. Ray's confidence in moulding the female narrator as one with potential intellect, rational thinking and intuitive power is apparent even in the first few chapters. Although Draupadi's accomplishment lies in the fulfilling of her father's vow and in preserving dharma, she was much troubled by the victimization of women for the cause of the world. She derives instances of the chaste women, who were her predecessors in upholding dharma by sacrificing themselves. These allusions are brought into the context by Draupadi as a foregrounding that she would not become a victim in the same manner without rebellion.

Should only woman be forced to be the medium for preserving dharma and annihilating evil throughout the ages? Is it woman who is the cause of creation and destruction? Sita had to become the medium for the destruction of Lanka and the establishment of Ram's rule...Then, Ravan's lust imprisoned her in the Ashok forest, insulted her, tormented her. Finally dharma was established on earth. The intention behind Ram's birth was fulfilled. But what did Sita get? The sentence of exile from Ram! Public test of chastity! The earth cracked open at the Calumny. To hide her sorrow, shame and insults Sita sank into Earth's lap. (Ray 8)

The use of the stream of consciousness technique by the author is an added credit to the attempt of rewriting the myth. Ray's attempt to bring out the unknown inner thought patterns of Draupadi has come out successfully, by offering equal importance to the dialogue as well as her interior monologue. The episodes with Karna and Krishna are replete with the rich flow of her inner conscious monologue. The description of her fantasy towards Krishna and her concern in offering herself to him is evident in the following lines.

So, Krishna was taking my name? What was I to him? His beloved wives were in Dvaraka...Me, dark-complexioned, why should he suddenly think of me? I had surrendered to him, so I remembered him. But why should he remember me...It was the garland round the neck which enhanced a God's glory and whose fragrance he inhaled. The flowers at the feet roll in the dust. (Ray 20)

Yajnaseni's narration is found to be highly mimetic and emotive. Every aspect of narration like the feelings of the character, the extravagance of the palace and festivities and her own appreciation or self pity, is delivered without leaving the minuscule of details. The arrangements made for Panchali's 'svayamvar' is truly a visual treat recorded in words. The pomp with which each plan was executed; including the test which the suitors had to undergo reveals the stateliness of the ceremony.

For decorating the assembly-hall for the 'svayamvar' famous painters and artists had arrived. Those who had not seen the palace of Indra were considering themselves blessed on seeing all the rich illumination, elaborate preparations and pageantry. Appropriate arrangements had been made in the assembly-hall for guests so that they could all watch the target-shooting...A silver canopy shot through with golden threads hung overhead...Some were thinking that if the princess' *svayamvar* celebration were to stretch on for many years then life would be replete with joy. (Ray 30)

The emotional narration of the times of delight and torment of Draupadi is aptly accompanied by the diction employed by the author. The inconvenience of walking down the 'svayamvar' hall like an object to be won is described in one of her monologues. "I would be on display before all. My beauty and radiance would spur the competitors on" (Ray 39). "I hated myself for having sat so long before such lust-driven sinful eyes. I felt soiled" (Ray 41).

On Karna's insult at the great hall as the adopted son of a charioteer and one who did not know his original parentage, Draupadi felt helpless and besieged his pardon within her. Her status as a princess was an apparent obstacle to display her humane tendency of being courteous asking his forgiveness. "...Heroic Karna, if I have the slightest role in the insult and abuse you have suffered, please forgive me. I feel your anguish with all my heart and soul. After this it is my turn to be insulted and shamed" (Ray 43).

Unlike *Yajnaseni*, *The Palace of Illusions* does not set the stage for the flash back of Draupadi's story. The readers directly land onto the early life of the Panchal princess who wails about her life latched within the iron curtains of the palace. Divakaruni's Draupadi is all the more preoccupied with the dream of owning a palace that would let her unleash all her fancies and concealed aspirations.

Staring down from my rooms at the bare compounds stretching below, I'd feel dejection settle on my shoulders like a shawl of iron. When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different...I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (Divakaruni 7)

Each chapter in the novel bears a title that sets the magnitude of expectations in the reader. For instance, the third chapter of the novel is titled 'milk' and it contains the exchange of stories between Draupadi and Dhristadyumna about Drona and their father. The importance of milk in the story lies where Drona and his wife are unable to buy milk for their son due to poverty. In order to have sufficient funds and to feed his family, he approaches his closest friend Drupad, who was then newly anointed as the king of Panchal. But never had Drona expected a humiliation at the court of Panchal, for Drupad failed to acknowledge their friendship and promise. Drona, whose ego was thus deeply hurt, took revenge on Drupad by making his best disciple to capture him. This incident is the sole cause of the birth of Draupadi and her brother. This story reveals the unreliability of the narration of Dhri since the primary narrator Draupadi subverts the story in favour of Drona.

Divakaruni's affirmation of female identity is methodically brought out in the fourteenth chapter entitled 'brinjal'. The title seems to aptly fit the episode in which Draupadi wins over her mother-in-law Kunti by cooking carefully according to the taste of her five husbands. A woman's greatest talent according to Indian system of beliefs and traditions lies in feeding her family with food rich in taste and nutrition. It is an age long belief that to enter into the heart of her husband, a wife should impress him with her culinary skills. Draupadi, though a sophisticated princess by birth, does not fail to impress her husbands. She politely contradicts her mother-in-law's prejudice and proves herself as a worthy daughter-in-law adept in various skills.

The metaphor of food in the novel echoes the motifs of food, eating and hunger that are explicit in Margaret Atwood's *Edible Women* and *Lady Oracle*. Atwood's novels generally present a fictional world where the food and hunger motif are found to repeat itself explicating the feminine consciousness and psyche. It is strongly connected to the experience of power and authority of women in the novels.

In the traditional heterosexist thinking, kitchen is the woman's place. Kitchen can sometimes be a prison to a woman, which is visible, for instance, in phrases like 'between the fist and the stove'. Contrary to this, kitchen can also be a place where a woman can be in charge and fulfil her possible desire to care by nourishing and cooking – depending on the perspective. (Lahikainen 68)

Similarly, Ray comes up with the motif of the lotus flower that bears different connotation at different contexts. Yajnaseni is often associated with lotus right from her birth at the sacrificial altar. Blue lotus bears the meaning of divine beauty throughout the novel and the motif is found to recur innumerable times. Panchali, lost in her fancies of the divine incarnate Krishna, remained frozen gazing at his feet which she equates to the blue lotus. The same fancy strikes her when she gets married to the third Pandav, unknowing of that truth. Yet, by instinct she finds it by the apparent similarity in the feet of Krishna and Arjun.

At the end of her letter where she climbs the Himalayas to attain 'svarg', she contemplates about the mystery of life and death in solitude. Bleeding to death, she feels remorse for being the source of a lethal catastrophe and wishes to be born again as one who harnesses love and peace. On letting go of her mortal cage, she wishes to unite with all her kith and kin, like the innumerable petals conjoined together.

I see the face of each and every one of those for whom I was mourning, having lost them, in each petal in your lotus-feet. My father, brothers, sons, ma Kunti, Gandhari, friends and relations and ultimately heroic Karna – all are getting united as petals! I am being blown away to be united in that very blooming lotus. (Ray 399)

Divakaruni's heroine is comparatively of a judgemental attitude, with a keen sense of investigation and curiosity than the one portrayed by Ray. While exchanging the story of Drona and Drupad, she discloses the unreliable nature of a story in general. The truth behind a tale cannot be obtained on hearing a single narration, for the course of events and their interpretations emerge in different colours, when heard from different people. Thus, Divakaruni reaffirms her purpose of rewriting the epic through the words of her protagonist cum primary narrator.

Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing. Certainly no one had told us this particular one...We'd had to cobble it together from rumors and lies, dark hints Dhari Ma let fall, and our own agitated imaginings. Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling. Or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power? (Divakaruni 15)

The author's use of diction is no less captivating than the author of *Yajnaseni*. While Ray's narrator is highly elaborate and touching when describing her own subjective conflicts and predicaments, Divakaruni uses Draupadi to render a dramatic expression of the great events in the *Mahabharata* and the secrets that unravel throughout the novel. The author employs the technique of zero focalisation in the disguise of the boon offered by the sage Vyasa to Draupadi. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the female narrator is the only witness to the bloody war who is able to envisage the warriors fighting within and without.

Thus the war went on, the physical battle outside matching the conflicts within each warrior...I saw the death throes of the innocent and the guilty, and both were equally terrible. In only a few hours, the ground turned red as though the skies had rained blood...I watched the pendulum of victory sway back and forth, one hour toward the Kauravas, the next toward the Pandavas... (Divakaruni 266)

The diction employed by the author undoubtedly creates the exact momentum during the battle scene where luck is aptly compared to the pendulum.

The two novels have the overtone of the protagonists yearning for self-affirmation and respectable existence. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is unmindful of the rules laid down by her father. Considering the feminist overtones of the rightful respect for women, a reader could comprehend the same issue discussed in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The author constantly emphasises on the necessity for a woman to hold money and privacy to tap her inherent talents. According to Woolf's survey of history, a lack of the two

aforementioned needs was the obstacle that prevented women from writing. “Without money, women are slavishly dependent on men; without privacy, constant interruptions block their creativity” (Wayne).

According to Barbara Hill Rigney, the women in Woolf’s novels split themselves into male subject and female object. “These characters maintain themselves to identify with the patriarchal society’s image of a woman by assuming the position of a male spectator towards themselves as a female spectacle; they become themselves artists and art-objects at the same time” (Alimam 9). Women are thus categorised as objects and the other who are devoid of critical thinking. This leads to their loss of self and identity. Thereby Rigney is concerned not about Woolf’s characters as artists but “as situating themselves in the traditional position which the male society has ordained for them” (Alimam 9).

Women feel suffocated within the mesh of patriarchal norms and become preoccupied with the thoughts of gender and discrimination. Rather than focussing on their subjects, women writers tend to shift their attention towards themselves. This subjective writing is the result of anger and insecurity which creates the melodramatic tone in women’s writing.

Today with the blood dripping from her heart Draupadi is writing about the start of her life on the stones of the holy Himalayas. Some day, for saving the oppressed world, you will arrive on earth by way of the Himalayas. That day you will read this blood-drenched autobiography written in indelible letters. “Aha!” – the exclamation will be voiced for Draupadi. Enough – that is all I want for myself. (Ray 3)

The narrator is found to write a painful autobiography of her hard times. This autobiography is written in the form of a secret letter to her friend Krishna, who in his next birth is expected to read and sympathise. By writing the letter to Krishna, Ray on behalf of Draupadi lets the reader to sympathise with all the women in sorrow.

In a lamenting tone, she broods over the future in which her name and chastity would be put to mockery. Her decision to inscribe her own brimming tale at the time of her death gives her peace of mind. For in writing did Draupadi disclose her heart’s desire and found solace during her times of solitude.

In a similar tone of retrospection in *The Palace of Illusions*, Panchali detains her memory of the worst events of her life at the final hours. On Krishna’s advice, her mind reaches out to ruminate the best moments of her earthly existence to heal her wounded soul. Longing for a palace all through her life, where love and fraternity pervades, the search terminates when her soul departs from her body. Panchaali, then no more is a tool of vengeance, the wife of the preservers of dharma or the queen of Hastinapur. She takes off from the world to an imaginary palace where she could live her desired moments with Karna and others, whom in the mortal world she had to hate.

Krishna touches my hand...At his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable...And yet, for the first time, I am truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for Karna – how surprisingly solid his clasp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I’ve ever needed. Its walls are space; its floor is sky, its center everywhere. We rise... (Divakaruni 360)

Thus the concluding paragraph of *The Palace of Illusions* marks not just the end of Draupadi’s life, but also the beginning of the long awaited love of Karna. This is evident of the fact that in the conflict between desire and dharma, women’s desires had been sidelined as immaterial and transgressive.

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