



Decrypting the Female Psyche in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Psyche addresses most profound musings, perspectives and feelings in one's life. As Alice H. Eagly opines, prominent psychologists may reinstate the belief that there is no significant segregation between male and female psyche, as they are clubbed within the umbrella of "human psyche", still it is inevitable to differentiate the mechanisms of male and female minds, and the gender segregation especially with respect to literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has successfully portrayed this distinction through her path breaking novel *The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008 as it effectively captures the renowned tale of Mahabharata reinterpreted through the perspective of Draupadi or Panchaali, as the protagonist.

Keywords: Female Psyche, Chitra Banerjee, Draupadi, Panchaali

What sets apart Divakaruni from various adaptations of Mahabharata is that she throws light on the major issues in the life of Panchaali, her experience as a woman in a society seeped into patriarchy that does not come to her rescue at the appropriate moment. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* fructified the yearning for the story being told in a woman's perspective, about the complexities of being a female and the inner turmoil that accompanies it.

Panchaali's earnest passion to be self-reliant is shown when she intends to be educated and independent even from the start of the novel. Though her father Drupad is against it, she pursues it because of her persistence and this showcases the seeds of her rebelliousness at the beginning. She pursues her education along with Dhristadyumna but beside a curtain so that she is away from the tutor. The tutor is so hesitant to teach her. He cannot accept that a woman can be more talented than man as Panchaali exhibits more talent than her brother Dhri, as he states that women are "the path to ruin" (Divakaruni 24) He further adds that, "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons." (Divakaruni 26) Though Dri Shares a nice bond with Panchaali, when she asks him to teach the exclusive classes

that he attends, related to statecraft, warfare and celestial astras, Dhri finds no reason in a woman's knowledge of these, as he too displays his occasional adherence to patriarchy.

In the initial phase of the novel, Panchaali is worried about her complexion, as she is seen as a dark complexioned woman and does not take pride in her appearance or her name until she meets Krishna. The feeling that she is inferior seems to vanish, as Panchaali realizes her real worth and is not driven to the standards of beauty expected by the society. She values herself to be beautiful. This is also witnessed in the later parts of the novel when she vows to leave her hair open till she avenges Dussasan for disrobing her, by bathing in Kaurava blood. In Spite of all her matted locks and unkempt hair, Sudeshna fears that her husband, the wife of the king Virat or her sons might fall for Panchaali, because of her beauty, despite being a dark complexioned maid and in tattered clothes. Again the duality is exposed, when the same queen who asks Panchaali to maintain distance from her husband and sons, encourages her to fulfill the demands of her brother Keechak, as she says, "Who knows if you'll ever see those husbands of yours again?...Make Keechak happy, and he'll make sure you have enough to live comfortably the rest of your life." (Divakaruni 230) It makes Panchaali think of the hegemony prevailing in the society, which she failed to notice as a queen, and it reminds one of the "subaltern woman's consciousness" (Spivak 90) As a maid she feels sympathetic to the cause of the downtrodden women as they cannot appeal for justice anywhere. Panchaali feels the pangs of despair striking her again, as she stands helpless in king Virat's abha as Keechak abuses her, echoing her previous experience.

Panchaali's experiences make her personality, as she changes her persona from time to time. Renowned analytical psychologist Jung remarks that "The persona is ... a functional complex that comes into existence for reasons of adaptation or personal convenience." ["Definitions," CW 6, par. 801.] Panchaali adapts herself to the world existing around her, without forgetting her goal. She strategically maintains her bond with Kunti as a respectable daughter in law, as a duty bound wife, as a maid to queen Sudeshna under various circumstances, through different facets of Persona. Panchaali uses her power of femininity which she has learned from the sorceress. She holds a significant impact on Bheema as he had fallen in love with her. Though she knows she is deceiving Bheema by not reciprocating true love, she pretends to love him. She is romantically withdrawn from her husband and is characterized by her unconfessed love for Karna. What appears to be an infatuation develop in various stages through the novel, despite her marriage and having children. Panchaali's power to overpower her love is shown when she chooses Arjun over Karna because of the political stance and for her own family's sake.

She thinks of luring Karna to have him look at her and admire her beauty, but suddenly thinks of the scriptures and abides by dharma, as a married woman is not supposed to think about another man as it is unfaithful to her husbands. She decides to give up her rainbow coloured jewelled dress that she had planned to wear to capture the attention of Karna and the gathering, by replacing it with a simple dress. According to Louann Brizendine, the changes in various stages of a woman's life is influenced by hormones, as she remarks "What we've found is that the female brain is so deeply affected by hormones that their influence can be said to create a woman's reality. They can shape a woman's values and desires, and tell her, day to day, what's important." (Brizendine 3) It indicates that the early infatuation of Panchaali in her entering adulthood stage towards Karna, to which she attaches so much significance, mellows down through the years.

In Spite of Panchaali's interest towards him in the later parts of the novel, she knows her priorities and their importance shifts towards healing herself. And she often reminds herself that she has to be hating Karna for that condescending remark he throws at her before he asks Dussasan to disrobe her. In Spite of knowing that the only person who can stop Duryodhan is Karna, she does not seek help from him, as she opines: "I knew what he wanted: for me to fall on my knees and beg him for mercy. He would have protected me then...I wouldn't lower myself to that, not if I died...I called on pride to freeze my eyes to stone" (Divakaruni 192). Thus, her love for Karna slowly changes into festering anger and irritation as she is irreparably harmed by him. Panchaali feelings transform from love to scathing hatred because her self-respect is questioned. Her grit and courage to call on pride in a situation that disastrously damaged her reputation shows her determination to become the woman that changes history as prophesied.

Panchaali's quest for independence develops early in her father's place, as she feels suffocated in Drupad's palace and longs for freedom. She feels happy and satisfied and sails through all her troubles when she lives in the Palace of Illusions and this palace has seamlessly mingled in Panchaali's life and she depends upon it for her happiness. Perhaps the only thing that keeps Panchaali going and keeps her in peace is the palace. Nowhere does she exhibit such love for her husbands or her children as she does for her palace. She identifies herself with the palace and finds solace in the palace.

Another disputable phenomena in Panchaali's characterization is her absence of maternal instincts, as she admits that she is a "distracted mother" (Divakaruni 229). A mother is supposed to dedicate her life and prioritize her children over everything. But in *The Palace of Illusions*, Panchaali leaves her children with Subhadra when they are banished for twelve years in the forest.

She spends her life with her husbands to keep the fire within them burning to avenge Dussasan and. She subverts the societal norms as it is a trait not expected from a typical Indian mother. Although Panchaali is uncomfortable with the marriages of the Pandavas, as they bring their new wives, soon befriend all of them, thus portraying the solidarity and affinity that exists among a group of women with similar interests as revealed by Son Vivienne in her article “Sisterhood”.

Sheer patriarchy is shown through the character of the king Drupad when he hates his own daughter Sikhandi when she fails to fulfil her promise. He openly shows his hatred for women and exhibits superiority over them. Panchaali who is excited about her marriage, as she can choose her husband on her own in her husband, feels hopeless when she comes to know that she cannot choose her groom in the swayamvar as well. Hence Dhritarashtra, Bheeshma, the Pandavas, Duryodhan and his company, Keechak exhibit patriarchy in some form or the other. Undeterred by all of such incidents, Panchaali emerges as the symbol of resistance and resilience, as she empowers herself throughout the novel.

One of the things that worry Panchaali more than most other things, is the love of Pandavas for their mother Kunti. Right from the day she comes to their hut along with Arjun. Like a typical mother in law and daughter in law, Kunti and Pachaali do not share a great equation and maintain their relationship just to maintain decency. Panchaali feels that the Pandavas are more attached to their mother and that Kunti is prioritized over her. She tries to loosen their bond when they move to the palace of illusions leaving Kunti in Hastinapur. Perhaps that's the reason why she feels independent in the palace, as finally Panchaali has got a place where she could make her own decisions, exercising autonomy being the queen.

Panchaali is overwhelmed by revenge as she seeks to get the answer for her being molested because of the dice game. She cannot accept that her husband has gambled her away and the elders do not come for her rescue. This cuts a deep wound in Panchaali's heart, which makes her crave for revenge above all. She gives up any other responsibility she has as a woman and sheds any other identity, as she becomes a true embodiment of revenge, and a woman that sets out to make history. Panchaali states:

It seemed that everything I'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchaali. (Divakaruni 229)

Panchaali is worried about her stay in King Virat's palace, when she serves as a maid to the queen Sudeshna is not only because of subservience to the queen, but because she feels lonely without her husbands and Krishna. This also brings to the notice the relationship of Panchaali and Krishna, as the close companions. Further she is more comfortable with Krishna than her husbands, because he gives Panchaali the respect and attention she deserves.

If there is a demerit in the character of Panchaali, that is her hamartia, her quick temperedness. And that lands her in trouble in most of the situations. Panchaali realizes this only after the gravity of her consequences. One such instance is the reason for her disrobing, when Duryodhan is made fun of by her attendees as he is drenched in water, and Panchaali being in the group does not apologize to Duryodhan for her behaviour, which she herself thinks over for the second time. Despite knowing that she has to pacify Duryodhan for the wrong she has committed, she shows aggressive behaviour by remaining quiet, thus justifying her mistake. According to Anna Campbell-

“Aggression is a form of intense contest competition. It is about gaining and defending a resource. Psychologists often distinguish between proactive and reactive aggression. Proactive aggression (sometimes known as instrumental aggression) is a means to securing some extraneous goal or resource. Reactive aggression (sometimes known as hostile, angry, or defensive aggression) is responsive to the takeover bids of others.” (Campbell 80)

This temperament of Panchaali can be related to reactive aggression, as her attitude towards Duryodhan is a result of his deeds towards the Pandavas, as Pandavas are denied their rights to rule Hastinapur. Her hostility towards him makes her behave in such a way that triggers him to plan the dice game and make her reap the consequences. Reactive aggression is again exhibited by Panchaali, when she reciprocates Karna's benevolent greetings with a slight nod, in spite of her longing to re-patch with Karna and to free her guilt ridden self. However, Panchaali's anger and hate overpowers her to exhibit aggression.

Panchaali acquires the freedom that she has been strenuously fighting for, at the end of the novel, as she says “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali” (Divakaruni 360). She is not just an enigma or a puzzle to be decoded, because she is the answer. She transcends stereotypes and transforms herself to be an empowered woman, breaking the shackles of all the forms of hierarchy by remaining dangerously true to herself, being independent, resilient and rebellious thus changing the course of history.

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