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Reclaiming the Interior: Female Bildungsroman, the Woman Question, and Mythic Allegory in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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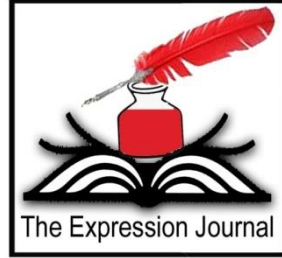
Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) re-examines Draupadi by relocating narrative authority from the established patriarchal frame to the interior consciousness of the heroine herself. This paper posits the novel as an instance of the female Bildungsroman, a genre historically theorized around the masculine subject's passage from innocence to social selfhood and asks what happens to that generic scaffolding when the developing "self" is a woman inscribed, from birth, within someone else's story. Citing Roland Barthes's proposition that "literature is the question minus the answer" as a methodological provocation, the paper proposes that Divakaruni's revisionist mythmaking does not resolve the "woman question" so much as it re-poses it with greater precision, exposing the mechanisms—birth, naming, marriage, war, exile—through which epic culture converts daughters into instruments of male destiny. It further examines Vyasa's own narratorial ambivalence toward Draupadi—at once her creator and her cautionary chorus—alongside the tragic masculine economies of *pitṛ-moha* (paternal attachment), *putra-moha* (filial attachment), and *mitra-moha* (attachment to friendship) that structure the fates of Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, and Karna, and that converge, finally, in Karna's debt of *salt to Duryodhana*. Employing Simone de Beauvoir's dictum that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," alongside Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's contemporary feminist vocabulary, the paper argues that Divakaruni's heroine "become" a woman twice over: once within the world of the epic, and once again in the retelling, where the act of narration is itself an act of feminist becoming.

Keywords

Female Bildungsroman, Woman Question, Draupadi, Mythic Revisionism, Simone De Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Allegory, Mahabharata, Feminist Literary Theory.

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Introduction

The Sanskrit epics have never lacked for women; what they have lacked, until recently, is a narrative apparatus willing to let those women speak in the first person. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythological novel intervenes poignantly at this point of narrative silence. *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata through the consciousness of Draupadi/Panchali - The novel makes a formal wager: that the epic heroine, when granted interiority, ceases to be an allegorical function—wife, prize, cause of war—and becomes instead a developing subject whose growth can be tracked, contested, and understood on its own terms. This is the core territory of the Bildungsroman, traditionally the novel of formation or “coming-of-age,” but the female variant of the form carries a different burden: the heroine's development occurs inside institutions—marriage, dynastic politics, war—that were never designed to develop her at all. The present paper argues that Divakaruni's novel dramatizes this tension self-consciously, using the resources of myth itself (its embedded tales, its narratorial apparatus, its economy of male attachments) to interrogate what “becoming a woman” means when the woman in question is also property, omen, and war-cause. The paper does not endeavour to resolve this tension into a single thesis about female empowerment; following Barthes, it treats the novel as a sustained question, and it structures its own argument as a series of open issues rather than a closed verdict.

Birth and the Refusal of Ordinary Origin

Draupadi is denied an ordinary human birth, and this denial is the first mechanism by which epic culture converts daughter into destiny. Draupadi is born, fully grown, from a sacrificial fire commissioned by her father Drupada, who sought a son to avenge him upon Drona; a disembodied voice at her birth prophesies that she will change the course of history. Here Draupadi is unwanted and unwelcomed until there is a prophecy that she would be the ‘spark’ to initiate the big fire. In Draupadi's case, birth is not a private, familial event but a public, instrumental one: the daughter arrives already scripted into a father's or a kingdom's larger

narrative. Divakaruni dramatizes this by having Panchali, in *The Palace of Illusions*, obsessively questioning the prophecy attached to her birth—she wants a name that is hers, not her brother’s shadow-name, not Draupadi as the daughter of Drupada, not Panchali as the princess of Panchal, nor ‘the one who will cause the Kshatriya race to be destroyed.’ The prophecy that shadows her is blunt: “You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time.” (Divakaruni, 39). This opening gesture is an announcement of the novel’s Bildungsroman ambition: if the classical epic fixes the heroine’s meaning at birth, the novel’s task is to re-open that meaning and track its unfolding across a lived interior life. The very grammar of the Bildungsroman—a form premised on gradual, experiential self-formation—is thus set in productive friction with a mythic mode in which the ending is, in some sense, already known before the story begins. This friction is not resolved; it is, rather, the novel’s engine.

Coming of Age as Contested Genre—the Female Bildungsroman

The classical Bildungsroman, as theorized from Goethe onward, follows a young man’s negotiated passage into bourgeois or civic selfhood through education, error, vocation, and eventual integration into society. Feminist genre theory has long noted that this template does not transfer neatly to female protagonists, whose “coming of age” is rarely rewarded with integration into public vocation; instead, it is more often rewarded—or punished—with marriage. Draupadi’s coming of age in *The Palace of Illusions* follows exactly this compressed arc: all her education, formal and informal, hints at a vocational, even philosophical, formation, but this formation is almost immediately subordinated to the marriage plot of the *swayamvara*, in which the archery test of the suitors becomes, paradoxically, an event she does not fully control and cannot decline. What the novel supplies, however, that the source epics withhold, is the heroine’s *rumination* on this compression—her irony, her retrospective anger, her sense of a self, larger than the plot allotted to her. This reflective surplus is what qualifies the novel as a Bildungsroman in a meaningful sense: the character’s growth here is not measured by vocational or civic attainment but by the heroine’s increasing capacity to narrate, judge, and finally reinterpret her own history. Panchali announces this very shift: “I would no longer waste time on regret. I would turn my face to the future and carve it into the shape I wanted.” (Divakaruni 104). The genre is thus not simply borrowed but adapted—what results might be better termed a Bildungsroman of consciousness rather than of achievement, in which the indicator of maturity is the heroine’s acquisition of a critical, authorial relationship to her own life.

This adaptation also demands a rethinking of what counts as a ‘trial’ in the female Bildungsroman. In the classical, male bildungsroman, trials are external and progressively mastered: a false vocation abandoned, a wrong companion discarded, a period of wandering resolved into settled purpose. For Panchali, the decisive trials are not obstacles on the way to a chosen life but ruptures within a life already assigned—the dice game she did not gamble in, the public humiliation she did not provoke, and the exile that followed, all of which test not her judgment but her endurance. Divakaruni’s narrative strategy is to relocate the site of ‘mastery’ from action to interpretation: Panchali cannot undo the dice game, but she can insist, in the retelling, on naming it correctly—as an act of male recklessness and complicity rather than an inevitability of fate. Maturity, in the novel, therefore consists not in escaping the plot, but in acquiring the authority to characterize it—a shift from the heroine as object of the sentence to the heroine as its grammatical subject. Panchali’s development pushes toward

public assertion—she is vocal in open court, she questions kings, her anger is collective and political.

The Allegorical Mirror—Nala-Damayanti and Savitri-Satyavan

Within the Mahabharata itself, Draupadi's suffering during the Pandavas' exile is twice glossed by two embedded tales told to console her: the story of Nala and Damayanti, and the story of Savitri and Satyavan. Both are, structurally, allegories of feminine endurance under male failure or mortality, and thus literary instruments of patriarchal hegemony. Damayanti's husband Nala loses his kingdom to a dice game precisely as Yudhishtira does, and she must follow him into exile and eventual restoration; Savitri's husband Satyavan is fated to die within a year, and she must out-argue Yama, the god of death himself, to win back his life. Both the tales are offered to women as consolation and, implicitly, as instruction: they suggest that feminine virtue—patience, wit, fidelity—is the mechanism by which a woman survives, and even rescues, the catastrophic decisions of men. Divakaruni's novel makes this didactic function visible and then complicates it. Panchali is supposed to imbibe the values of these stories and recognizes their design—she notes, in effect, that she is being handed a script for how to suffer nobly rather than a model for how to refuse suffering. The allegories function, in this reading, as a *mise-en-abyme*: stories within the story that reveal the ideological labor the frame narrative wants Draupadi to perform. Where Savitri is rewarded for her cleverness with restoration of the status quo (her husband's life, the kingdom, the family line intact), Draupadi's own cleverness—most notably in her interrogation of Yudhishtira's right to stake her in the dice game—produces no such clean restoration; the Kaurava court's response to her question is silence, followed by attempted disrobing. The allegory thus illuminates by contrast: it shows what a “successful” mythic heroine looks like, and Draupadi's story is, precisely, the record of that success being denied her. Divakaruni's revisionist move is to let Panchali see this discrepancy and name it, converting an embedded consolation into an object of critique. This critique rests on the novel's suspicion of stories themselves: “At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing. Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling” (Divakaruni 15).

Vyasa's Cautionary Note and the Woman Question

A significant feature of Draupadi's textual existence is that her author within the epic—the sage Vyasa, traditionally credited with composing the Mahabharata and who, in the frame narrative, is also her grandfather-figure, guru and occasional counselor—treats her with a mixture of reverence and warning. Vyasa grants Draupadi extraordinary gifts (beauty, intelligence, the capacity to be reborn as she wishes) and yet repeatedly cautions her, and the narrative cautions its audience, about the dangers of her fire-born, unyielding temperament—her anger is figured as combustible, her honour as a trigger for cosmic-scale destruction. The counsel she receives is itself double-edged: “The power of a man is a bull's charge, while the power of a woman moves aslant, a serpent seeking its prey,” and she must learn “the particular properties of [her] power” (Divakaruni 52). This ambivalence is the epic's own internal staging of the “woman question”: is Draupadi a heroine or a hazard? Is her refusal to be humiliated a virtue or a provocation? Divakaruni's novel takes this ambivalence and inhabits it from the inside, allowing Panchali to hear the cautionary framing directed at her and to resist the idea that her anger is the true cause of the Kurukshetra war—a causal attribution the epic itself half-endorses and half-satirizes. Krishna's own diagnosis complicates the attribution further, since he names “anger and desire” as humanity's “two

direst enemies” (Divakaruni 264), rather than a woman’s peculiar failing. This is where Roland Barthes’s formulation becomes methodologically useful: “literature is a question minus the answer.” (Barthes 202) The Mahabharata directs, through Draupadi, an unanswered question about female rage, agency, and the price of dignity, and rather than resolving it, Divakaruni’s retelling sharpens the question’s edges. The novel does not conclude that Draupadi was blameless, nor that she was to blame; it insists, instead, that the very frame which asks “was she to blame” is itself a symptom of the epic’s discomfort with a woman who refuses silent endurance. The “woman question,” in this sense, is not a question the novel answers but one it relocates—from the trial of Draupadi’s character to a trial of the narrative conventions that put her on trial in the first place.

Tragic Economies of Male Attachment—*Pitṛ-moha*, *Putra-moha*, *Mitra-moha*, and the *Salt of Duryodhana*

Draupadi’s fate is not determined by her own choices alone; it is overdetermined by a network of male attachments that structure the entire epic’s tragic architecture, and Divakaruni’s novel is acute in tracing this network even as it centers Panchali’s own consciousness. Bhishma’s tragedy is rooted in *pitṛ-moha*, attachment to the father—his vow of lifelong celibacy and renunciation of the throne, taken to secure his father Shantanu’s late-life desire, binds him for the rest of his life to a court he can critique but never truly govern, including at the moment of Draupadi’s disrobing, when his oath-bound paralysis becomes complicit silence. Drona, the one supposed to be highly wise, and Dhritarashtra, the one deprived of physical eyesight, by contrast, are each undone by *putra-moha*, attachment to the son: Drona’s partiality toward Ashwatthama corrodes his fairness as a teacher and eventually his life whereas Dhritarashtra’s blind indulgence of Duryodhana—his inability to discipline a son he loves more than the kingdom he nominally rules—leads to the dice game itself, since it is Dhritarashtra who permits Duryodhana’s invitation to Yudhishtira to stand.

Among these events, another contributing node, Karna’s tragedy is structured differently again, around *mitra-moha*, attachment to friendship: his loyalty to Duryodhana, the one figure who publicly honoured him despite his uncertain birth, becomes an unbreakable bond that Karna will not renounce even when he learns his true parentage and is offered reconciliation with the Pandavas. This loyalty is often summarized in the idiom of “*the salt of Duryodhana*”—Karna’s sense that he has eaten Duryodhana’s salt, incurred a debt of sustenance and dignity that only lifelong fidelity, even unto a war he privately doubts, can repay. Karna himself frames this as *karmic* accounting: “I’ll still have to pay for them. Isn’t that how *karma* works?” (Divakaruni 275). What unites these four tragic figures—Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Karna—is that each is undone not by malice but by an excess of a socially sanctioned virtue: filial devotion (Bhishma), paternal love (Drona and Dhritarashtra), and loyal friendship (Karna). It is worth noting, further, that each of these attachments is retrospectively legible as noble even in defeat: the epic tradition mourns Bhishma on his bed of arrows, grieves Drona’s death at the hands of a lie he could not verify, and reserves some of its most affecting poetry for Karna’s days before the war, when he keeps his promise of charity even to a disguised god who comes to strip him of his protective armour. Divakaruni’s novel is significant precisely because it lets Panchali see this pattern clearly and comment on its gendered asymmetry: the men around her are permitted tragic grandeur, their attachments narrated with epic sympathy even as those attachments produce her humiliation, while her own attachment—to her own dignity—is treated by the same narrative tradition as dangerous excess rather than tragic virtue. Bhishma’s silence during her

disrobing is remembered as a tragic bind rather than a moral failure; Dhritarashtra's indulgence of Duryodhana is remembered as a father's pardonable weakness; but Draupadi's vow to leave her hair unbound until it is washed in Kaurava blood is remembered, within the tradition, as evidence of her fearsome and faintly dangerous temperament. Panchali registers the cost of this asymmetry precisely: "The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future." (Divakaruni195). The asymmetry is not incidental to the epic's structure; it is one of the primary mechanisms by which the "woman question" is smuggled into a narrative that otherwise appears to be organized around male conflict. *The salt of Duryodhana*—Karna's felt debt for the dignity and sustenance he received at a moment when his birth made him an outcast among the assembled Kshatriyas—thus becomes, in this reading, a structural analogue for the different, harsher currency in which Draupadi's own loyalty and anger are priced: where Karna's debt is honoured by the epic as tragic constancy, Draupadi's demand that her own humiliation be honoured and avenged is treated, at least by some voices within the text, as a demand requiring justification. Divakaruni's novel does not simply invert this asymmetry; it exposes it, allowing readers to see that the epic's sympathy is distributed according to gender-coded categories of attachment long before any individual character's choices are weighed.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir's proposition that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" finds an unusually literal test case in this novel, whose heroine is denied even the ordinary biological "birth" from which Beauvoir's process of becoming is normally assumed to begin. Draupadi is, from her first appearance, already women in the epic's ideological sense—already daughters-as-destiny, already brides-in-waiting—and the novel's task is to carve out, retrospectively, the process of becoming that the epic foreclosed. Divakaruni's Panchali offers an image for this process: "we grow to become that which we live within" (Divakaruni 113). Elaine Showalter's gynocritical insistence on reading women's writing (and, by extension, women's re-writing of inherited narrative) as possessing its own coherent tradition and value helps to justify treating Divakaruni's novel as a serious contribution to feminist literary history rather than as merely popular mythological fiction. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's contemporary vocabulary—the insistence that culture does not make people, people make culture—resonates with the novel's suggestion that the epic's treatment of Draupadi was never inevitable, only conventional, and therefore open to the kind of imaginative renegotiation this novel performs. Returning to Barthes, it is worth insisting that the value of *The Palace of Illusions* lies not in any final answer it supplies to the "woman question" the Mahabharata poses, but in the precision and sympathy with which it keeps that question open—allowing readers to sit, as Panchali herself must, inside an unresolved and still-urgent inquiry into what it costs a woman to become the subject, rather than merely the occasion, of an epic.

This inquiry also has implications beyond the novel considered here. If the female Bildungsroman, in its mythic register, is best understood as a Bildungsroman of consciousness—one in which maturity is measured by interpretive authority rather than by social or vocational integration—then a comparable reading strategy might productively be extended to other contemporary revisions of inherited narrative across traditions, wherever a culture's foundational stories have historically subordinated their female figures to male plot and male memory. Draupadi's retelling suggests that the recovery of a mythic heroine's

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interiority is never merely an act of sentimental restoration; it is, as this paper has tried to show, an act of structural critique, one that asks a founding tradition to answer for the uses to which it has put its daughters.

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