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Reconstructing Signs and Images: A Feminist re-interpretation of *Mahabharat*

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Abstract: This paper explores, deconstructs, interrogates, exposes and defines how ‘reality’ of a phallogocentric world which has now been converted into ‘truth’ through one of our ancient religious text *Mahabharat*, gets challenged through writing the same text from a feminine perspective. The paper uses methods of dialogism and second wave of feminism to critically analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Palace Of Illusions* vis-à-vis *Mahabharat* and shows how the patriarchal set-up of the society has defined the rules of the religion through these ancient texts. The paper also uses Foucault to show how, through these ancient religious texts, power is exercised on women to subvert them.

Keywords: Ecriture feminine, Mahabharat, Foucault, religion, Hindu, second wave of feminism, women, Bakhtin.

It is a well-known fact that for centuries all over the world women have been forced to be in the marginalized position. The phallogocentric, patriarchal universe has consistently tried to denigrate women through scientific evidences, literature, law, politics, religion, culture and, in the contemporary times, through media. But what has

kept women in a subordinate position for so long? How have men been able to control women for millenniums? Was it only physical control or psychological oppression? How was this power/control exercised and what were the mediums through which it was practiced?

Foucault's "Two Lectures" in *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977* not only exposed the dangerous nexus between power, knowledge and truth but also laid bare the "polymorphous techniques of subjugation." He analyzed power to see how it is exercised in the society. Society exercises power with certain "production of truth." These truths are established through different institutions and that is how the "culture of truth" is initiated. Foucault, in his essay, also analyses these power structures and says:

... in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are relations of power, which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse... We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (93)

Poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard in his famous book *Simulacra and Simulation* talks about "hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs" (Poster 6). He defines 'Simulacra' as the copies that depict things which either had no reality to begin with, or have lost its original and 'Simulation' as the imitation or copy of the operation of a real-world process or system over time. Defining and differentiating Simulacra, Simulacrum and hyperreality, Baudrillard says:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, not even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes... A hyperreal

henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference. (Poster 170)

One of the mediums of production of truth and exercising power in our ‘hyperreal’ world is through religion which gets propagated through literature. Hence, if we imagine that we are living in Baudrillard’s world of ‘hyperreality’ which derives meaning from signs and symbols, we can consider masculine literature as ‘Simulacra’, as we do not know when we started taking it as real, while feminine literature as ‘Simulation’. We are living in this ‘hyperreal’ world where images, signs, symbols are bombarded upon us in such a way that we start considering it first as ‘real’ and then as ‘truth’. Here, we are talking about, first, production of ‘truth’ through literature and second, literature as one of the carriers of signs and symbols.

This paper explores, deconstructs, interrogates, exposes and defines how ‘reality’ of a male-centric/phallogocentric world which has now been converted into ‘truth’ through one of our ancient religious text *Mahabharat* gets challenged through writing the same text from a feminine perspective. *Mahabharat* can be considered as a religious text and also one of Foucault’s ‘polymorphous techniques of subjugation’. This ‘discourse’ of religion through masculine literature is one of the modes of production of ‘truth’ which gets accumulated, established, consolidated and constructed through it. *Mahabharat*, in Baudrillard’s terms, can be called as ‘Simulacrum’, an imitation which has been presented to us as the ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Palace of Illusions* gives voice to Draupadi and writes *Mahabharat* through her point of view. Divakaruni can be said to be de-establishing the ‘truth’ which was established by the masculine text. Through her text, she tries to create and establish a new ‘truth’ and a new ‘reality’ which can be called ‘Simulation’.

Now, the question which arises is – can this process change the perspective of an ancient text which has upheld the tradition of patriarchy for so long that we do not even know when it started? The

answer, I think, can be found in the words of Jean Paul Sartre as he says:

... when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his individuality, but that he is responsible for all men... In fashioning myself I fashion man. (29-30)

Taking cue from Sartre can we say that a feminine perspective given from a woman in a work of literature is a first step towards defining themselves and hence, empowering not just themselves but the whole women community? But how the strangulated voices of women were heard in the complexity of the text? How the text which has a reputation of hegemonic masculine voices got deconstructed? The answer lies in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and second wave of feminism.

Poststructuralist Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, described intertextuality in a text through the terms “heteroglossia” and “dialogism” which define a text as composed of unheard, multiple, different voices. The pathbreaking essays invited informed critical thinking hence exposing oppressive, hierarchical, exclusionary interpretative practices of the patriarchal society. The oppressed feminine voices in the plethora of multiple voices were heard by feminists who dislodged these masculine interpretations. They uncovered the phallogocentric universe of men which does not allow these voices to come out. French feminists like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig questioned these practices and raised questions pertaining to the conditions of subjectivity, identity, representation and agency. These thinkers of second wave of feminism came out with the French term *écriture féminine* which throughout the whole feminist movement feminists from all around the world have explored, questioned and problematized to explain different subjugated practices against women using discourses of religion, culture and tradition.

Écriture féminine, which literally means ‘women’s writing’, was first coined by Helene Cixous. Helene Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” calls for two kinds of revolution. The revolution of the first kind pleads women to write for herself and for other women. She

should create a space for herself in the text which simultaneously would create a place for her in the real world. They should stop this violence of feminine subjugation by striking back through their writings. As she says:

I shall speak about women's writing about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her movement. (875)

The second revolution would call upon the women who are trapped in the patriarchal notions. It is these women who should be recovered from the darkness of patriarchal values and traditions. They should be awakened from their deep slumber – their slumber of ignorance, submissiveness and passiveness. As Helene Cixous in the same text calls upon this feminine struggle, “I am speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (875-6).

Bakhtin in his book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* gave the concept of dialogism. Patricia Waugh sums up dialogism as “thought of vis-à-vis the conditions we associate with ‘dialogue’ in everyday life” (Waugh 226). Further, she says, “In essence, all thought became, for Bakhtin, a matter of ‘dialogue’ and ‘difference’: a dialogue requires the pre-existence of differences, which are then connected by an act of communication to generate new ideas and positions” (226). However, the dialogism in the most profound manner is explained at an individual level. The dialogue which we have with ourselves, to clear out positions can also be seen as interrogation.

Using dialogism, Divakaruni here reinterprets *Mahabharat* in an entirely new way. Keeping Draupadi as the narrator, Divakaruni, through the mode of constant interrogation, questions the positions and practices of other people. This interrogation occurs at the unconscious

level. It is through this mode Draupadi reveals her inner self. This process of writing oneself is what Cixous talks about. Draupadi in the novel exposes the prejudices of the male chauvinistic society in which both males and females are so tied up that women have just stopped questioning. Females here have also taken the role of men and follow patriarchal rules and traditions. In this society, men set the rules which are executed by both men and women.

Divakaruni has given Draupadi an interrogative voice in the novel. She has used Bakhtin's dialogic method to reveal and expose the male biases and prejudices. Her interrogation is at two levels; first, at an individual level with which she exposes other people's bias towards her. At the second level, she interrogates and questions others. Her interrogation makes people conscious of their prejudices because of which she is discouraged to ask questions. She is discouraged to think beyond the masculine boundaries.

Talking about Draupadi's Swayamvar in *Mahabharat*, we observe that it was designed to lure Arjun. Drupad wanted to take revenge on Drona. Drona's disciple was Arjun, and to gain confidence of both Arjun and Drona the easiest thing was to tie him in the nuptial bond with Draupadi. This would strengthen the position of Drupad against Drona. When Draupadi comes to know about her Swayamvar, she is delighted to know that she was practicing her free will – she would be making her own choice. Her dreams are shattered after knowing that the whole process was being done to attract Arjun so that her father could take his revenge. She feels cheated and says "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I had been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (57). She was being used not just by Drupad but also by the Pandavas who won her to gain a strong ally against Kauravas.

When the Pandavas reach home and tell Kunti jokingly that they have brought something. Kunti without seeing her, ask them to divide whatever they have brought amongst themselves. Even when she realizes that Draupadi is not a thing but a woman, she did not budge. She orders them all to marry her. Draupadi, describing the incident, laments at her own helplessness and objectification and says, "I stared

at her, my brain trying to take in what she had said. Was she joking when she said they must all marry me? No, her face made that clear. I wanted to shout, five husbands? Are you mad? I wanted to say, I'm already married to Arjun!"(108).

When the Pandavas go back to Drupad to ask him to marry Draupadi to all five of them, Drupad is outraged. He does not agree and says in Kampilya his daughter would be called a whore. However, the Pandavas in that case wanted to leave "married" Draupadi with Drupad only. Drupad angrily says, "Draupadi would most likely have to take her own life, and then we'd have to hunt you down and kill you in revenge" (118). After much of a debate, Drupad agrees to marry her with all five brothers. Draupadi here did not have the authority over her own body. Her agency before marriage was with her father and which got transferred to her husband Arjun when he won her – Arjun, who now was supposed to share her with other brothers. Her fate was debated and discussed without considering her consent or dissent as that was not needed. Draupadi sees her destiny being discussed and says,

I didn't fear the fate they imagined for me (I had other plans for my life). But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit-or harm- them. (118)

Draupadi in the novel is denied her sexual desires by marrying off to five brothers. She was treated like a commodity being divided equally among the men. Polyandry was not a prevalent tradition of the contemporary society. Polygamy existed but not polyandry. Even women of the period like Dhairya Ma say that she should be proud that she has five husbands. For the lay woman the concept of polyandry becomes a symbol of emancipation of woman or a celebration of womanhood. However, Divakaruni's Draupadi questions and punctures this whole celebration of polyandry. It was not with her consent or desire that she was shared by the five brothers. Here, her own sexuality is curtailed as she had to yield to the fantasies and desires of five men.

Vyasa designs a special marital conduct for Draupadi and her five husbands that she would be wife of each brother for a year at one time,

from the oldest to the youngest. During that period others won't touch her or look at her. Draupadi laughs off at this arrangement and says,

I can't say I was surprised by Vyasa's verdict. ...I was surprised at how angry it made me feel – and how helpless. Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying finally I had the freedom men had for centuries, 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).

To add to her injuries, Vyasa gives her a boon that each time she went to a new brother, she'd be a virgin again. She questions for whom that particular boon was designed. Was this for her or her husbands? Of course, it was nothing to do with her desires but the sexual desires of her husbands who would be elated to have a virgin. Draupadi comments on Vyasa's boon and says, "...nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed, more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women – they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted" (120).

The tragic humiliation and assault on her body is the worst of the trauma which Draupadi goes through. Yudhisthir in a game of gamble with Shakuni not only loses his kingdom but also his brothers, himself and Draupadi. When Draupadi comes to know about Yudhisthir losing her in the gamble, she could not understand what was done to her as an individual, in her own denial mode she talks to herself:

I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhrishtadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. (190)

But, then she also remembers a quote from a book which said that "*The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave*" (190). Her questions do not stop here. Being well versed in *Nyaya Shastra* she remembers another quote, "*If perchance a man lost himself,*

he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife” (190). Remembering this, she orders the charioteer and asks him to go back and ask the elders, “Is it not true that once Yudhisthir was Duryodhan’s property, he had no right to wager me?”(190). Without providing her an answer, she was dragged by hair to the court filled with all men with only a cloth on. Even her one cloth was asked to be taken off from her body in front of her husbands and elders. Here, we see the process of subjugation, first, in the form of creating the rules & regulations which are paraded as ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ in front of women in the form of shastras, and second, subjugation through physical force when a woman refuses to accept the ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ established by man.

Feminists have long been calling upon women to talk about their sexuality, to come out of the shackles of dominating men who have oppressed woman’s sexuality and their desires for too long. In *Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is neither shameful of her desires nor for her sexuality. Her body was in control of her husbands but not her mind. Even characters like Dhai Ma discusses about her sexual desires even if it was within the feminine space. By making her women characters speak about their sexual desires, Divakaruni delimits the boundaries of sexual desires set by men. Divakaruni’s Draupadi writes herself and her body and reveals her own sexual desires and fantasies. She reveals her love towards Arjun and her desire to have Karan.

To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Palace of Illusions* can be taken as a text which challenges the authority of power, exercised on women through masculine literature by creating this literature as ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. This novel tries to change this process of execution of power, by revealing the structures of power and by creating a new ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ in which even women have their say through the process of constant interrogation or dialogism.

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