Revisiting Women’s Experience In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Palace Of Illusions

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Abstract: Representation of women in literature is considered to be a key to know the role of women in the society. Literature represents society, role of women in literature has always been a fact to discuss and debate on. Existence of women in literature has been menial early, In Recent years it has gained its prominence. This paper revalues the role of women characters in Mahabharata based on representation in Banerjee’s work Palace of Illusions.

Index Terms: culture and literature, feminist reading, history and feminism, Myth, women experience, women identity, representation in literature.

1 INTRODUCTION

EPIC and Myth has its importance and influence in Indian culture and literature all through the years. The characters and the happenings have excited many readers and writers. Reinterpretation and retelling has emerged in literature, Retelling myth in different perspective has become a trend in recent years. Bringing out the unnoticed viewpoints of the characters in prewritten text, have influenced many in all languages. The most of re-telling of mythology in recent days is not on men rather on women’s perspective. Most of it revolves around the female characters and their point of view on the happenings. Gives voice in the prevailing patriarchal society. The original has never attempted to project their view. This paper is on the female character of the epic Mahabharat. Draupadi in book, The Palace of illusions by Chitra Banerjee. This retelling emphasizes identity and assertion of women, their want and need, ambition and longing, thought and action. The novel is an exciting read as the feminine perspective plays the vital role. Her role and view as women on war, marriage, swayamvar, motherhood, bias and education is projected efficiently.

2 REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LITERATURE

The feminist literary criticism today is the result of women's movements which took place in early years. There were many female writers and their books which contributed more to the movements, which strived for the recognition of women in literature and society. The books include Mary Wollstonecraft’s A vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), Virginia woolf’s A room of one’s own (1929), Simone de Beauvoir’s The second sex (1949). Elaine showalter’s A literature of their Own. Portrays unequal treatment of women, their quest for education and alternative for stereotyped approach. The early movements wanted women to be an author, reader and language for women in male dominant writings. Many writers wrote in pseudonyms initially hiding their women identity. Representing women in literature was considered as a key to socialization, since it would serve as a role model.

“The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’, since it provided role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (117, Barry Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American award author; has received American Book Award in 1995, Pushcart Prize, and Crawford Award. Her major novels include Arranged Marriage (1995), The Mistress of Spices(1997), Sister of My Heart(1999), Queen of Dreams, One Amazing thing(2010), Palace of illusions(2008), Oleander girl and Before we visit the Goddess (2016). Her works are often Quasi-Autobiographical, as she is Indian and lives in America. In her novel she attempts the unimaginable perspective, where she represents Mahabharat through the voice of Draupadi, the main female character in the epic. It is one kind of exhilarating experience for the readers. The original text was about gods, demons and kings, but Divakaruni provides humanistic touch, which is easily relatable and readable.

3 EXISTENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Draupadi's existence and experience is prioritized, her quest for identity, love, recognition, education and existence in palace is penned by author, an attempt to be acknowledged and appreciated. Many other women characters are depicted by divakaruni. Every characters live the life chosen by them, not the one which is implicted or forced on them by the men of society: Kunti, Panchali’s Mother-in- Law chose to sacrifice her life for upbringing her children, she decides even to rise her husband's children. Gandhari after marrying blind king Dhritarashtra decides to blindfold herself for the rest of her life. To live life equal and devoted to her husband. Right from her birth Draupadi's experiences is a major focus in the work. At time of her birth, her father was expecting a son and not a daughter. First inequality or dejection is by her father as he welcomes her brother and not her. “He held out his arms—but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted.”

Elaine showalter in her work argues “We are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be.”(Elaine). In early literature as Elaine Showalter states women's experience is not even considered, but in Palace of Illusions, Draupadi's character projects both on how she was treated and taught to behave at times during childhood, marriage and war. How to be a daughter, wife, and Mother. What would be her duty as a princess and Queen, and also on what she felt and experienced. The view of society and men on how women should be is also given priority. I don’t wish to imply that king Drupad neglected my education. An unending stream of women flowed through my apartments each day, attempting to instruct me in the sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know. I was given lessons in singing, dancing and playing

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music. (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet.) I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for special festival. (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt he world of women tightening its noose around me. I had destiny to fulfill that was no less momentous than Drahi’s. Why was no one concerned about preparing me for it? (Pol 29) Aspirations to take up education as like her brother but she was denied, lessons on how to sing, dance, sew, paint and decorate floor with designs were taught. No men support or persuade her to take up education. She regards her duties are on par with Drahi’s but the opportunity given is biased. He was always trying to discourage me from attending Drahi’s lessons- and he wasn’t the only one. At first, no matter how much I begged, King Draupadi had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? (Pol 22)

4 Draupadi and Judith Shakespeare

Draupadi’s character, compared with her brother and the opportunities provided to him and denied to her can be compared with the imaginative character Judith Shakespeare by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own. Woolf creates her to show how a woman with talent equal to Shakespeare but because of the structure of society is not able to achieve the same as her brother. When her brother is sent to school her family persuades her to early marriage. When she prefers education, she was asked to: “Mend the stockings or mind the stew” (Woolf). Being women she couldn’t achieve the same as her brother. She escapes to London to pursue arts. Later she finds herself pregnant by an actor in the theatre and commits suicide, where in case of Shakespeare he prospered as an actor and later a renowned playwright. Literature served as a means to bring out the cultural mindset of men and women which made sexual inequality in existence. Women identity is based on men. Women are considered as the other but not the one. The Identity Draupadi bear: “I’m a queen. Daughter of king Draupad, Sister of Dhritadyumna, Mistress of the greatest palace on earth.” (Pol 189). Her identity is based on Men: her father, brother and husbands as daughter, sister and mistress. Individuality and identity becomes a question. The experience of women can easily disappear, become mute, invalid and even invisible. Simon de Beauvoir’s in The Second Sex (1949) writes “one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman (Beauvoir). When Panchali is interested in martial arts and war ethics. She is trained on how to behave as a wife and be supportive to men during war. The concern with ‘conditioning’ and ‘socialisation’ underpins a crucial set of distinctions- that between the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, and ‘feminine’. As Toril Moi explains, the first is ‘a political position’, the second ‘a matter of biology’, and the third ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. (117 Barry) As culturally defined marriage takes place with the consent of parents, Draupadi’s marriage with Arjun was of the same, it is decided and events happens, where she finally gets married to Brahmin, whose identity in disguise, her choice or concern is not valued. The commoners erupted in cheers, though the kings were ominously quiet. Dhri grasped the man’s hands; my father descended from his throne; the priests hurried to the dias; my attendants rushed forward, strewing flowers and gabbling wedding songs. Someone thrust the garland into my hands (Pol 99). Her fate was debated and discussed without her consent or dissent as that was not needed. Draupadi sees her destiny being discussed by the men in her life. 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. (Pol 118) Draupadi claims her privilege throughout but she is conscious enough about her responsibilities as a wife, which she fulfills with self- assertion. Divakaruni brings out pride and importance of Panchali in her world. I’d played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I’d share their hardship in Khandav. I’d helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pearl, I was the gold wire on which they were strung” (Pol 151). Draupadi describes the role she played in the new kingdom framed for pandavas, the uniqueness of palace, and the hardships she went through along with her husbands. The palace is built based on her wish and imaginations, which she is proud of and many longed to visit, first time after her birth she has the sense of belonging only at this palace as she is the Queen of it, Draupadi through their duties and constant belief attained this.

5 Conclusion

There is much portrayal of sufferings, but underneath her self-assertive nature and womanhood is efficiently portrayed than imagined. Draupadi is the major key, to question the men folk against injustice and rejection of women. Pushpalatha states in her article Consciousness of self in Gita Harirhanar’s The Thousand faces of Night and Rajam Krishnan’s Lamps in the whirlpool. “Devi had grown up listening to stories told by her grandmother. Her grandmother used to say stories from Mythology, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The stories of Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari and Ganga were told by her which builds confidence in devi.” When in other versions of Mahabharat, the existence of women is less known and visited, Palace of illusions provides a corridor to revisit women in ancient myths. Revisiting gives insights and various perspectives of the women characters. Than a feminist read, this is a kind of experience to acknowledge women, their achievement and assertiveness.

References

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