

Marginalized Voices of Past: With Special Reference to ‘The Palace of Illusions’

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Abstract

Chitra Lekha Banerjee is a great Indian English novelist who has enriched the fiction field with many novels like The Queen of Dreams, The Mistress of Spice etc. ‘The Palace of Illusions’ is one of them that depicts the society of the Third Age of Man known as Dvapara Yuga. Chiefly the novel deals with the life and sufferings of a great mythical character Draupadi who is the incarnation of the fire element. Despite being a princess, a queen she always feels herself marginalized, exploited and neglected. Her father Drupad gives more importance to her brother Dhrishtyuma and discrimination can be seen in the way both are brought up. After marriage her husbands also neglect her. They do not come to save her; in fact not a single man in the crowded court of Dhrishtra volunteers to save her when she is humiliated by Duryodhan. While following her husbands during the final journey of life, the Mahaprasthan towards the Himalayas, she falls down due to extreme cold and when she begs help from Bheem, Yudhishthira prevents him from doing so. These are some examples quoted from the novel that reveal the patriarchal social structure of the mythical society of Dvapara Yuga.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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‘The Palace of Illusions’

Notions June 2024,
Vol. XV, No. 1,
pp. 01 - 06
Article No. 1

Online available at :
[https://anubooks.com/journal/
notions](https://anubooks.com/journal/notions)

Introduction

Mrs Chitra Lekha Banerjee is a great Indian English novelist who has practiced her hand in poetry and fiction equally. She has written novels like *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, *The Last Queen* etc. She is a social worker also who has worked in the field of education and domestic violence. History, mythology, condition of women in society, contemporary India and America are some of the fields of her fictional study. *The Palace of Illusions* is one such novel written by her that deals with the life and experiences of a mythical character Draupadi, the incarnation of ideal Indian womanhood in the Third Age of Man termed as Dvapara Yuga. Through the novel we are acquainted with the discontent, the sufferings and the agony of Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad who in spite of having a great inner fire feels sometimes cheated and exploited in a male-dominated society in her own kingdom.

We come to know through the novel that Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupad, the ruler of Panchala, one of the richest kingdoms in the continent of Bharat. She and her brother Dhrishtadyumna had a miraculous birth through the sacrificial fire. As both of them are born out of the revengeful penance of Drupad against Dronacharya, so accordingly they possess extraordinary fire and feelings. Draupadi is the incarnation of fire and brilliance and her brother is a born warrior whose entire life is the preparation for revenge. But there are seeds of discrimination in the way both are brought up. In the words of Dhishma:

“Even before we’d finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too.....”¹

Thus the birth of both has been followed by the mysterious voices of the fire declaring the son capable of taking the revenge and the daughter destined to change the course of history. But the way the daughter has been named as Draupadi and is initially rejected by Drupad as compared to her brother, fills her with bitterness and, consequently, she loses trust in her father forever:

“In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn’t forgive him for that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn’t trust him completely.”²

Obviously this attitude of a father towards his daughter and the daughter’s feelings for her father both throw light on the fact that even at that age a boy was considered superior to a girl and his birth was subject to welcome. Further the way

both the children are imparted education also shows that women in that age were on the margin and the centre was occupied by men. At first the princess is denied this privilege even after having a sincere desire to learn, but on the repeated insistence of Lord Krishna arrangements are made for her education also. But the nature of subjects taught also puts forth the double standard assumed by the society. While Dhristadyumna is taught to wrestle, to ride horses and elephants, archery, politics, war science and the use of sword, spear and mace, Draupadi is taught singing, dancing, sewing, painting, decorating the house on special occasions and playing music which she never liked. Her discontent is obvious in these lines:

“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 the world of women tightening its noose around me. I had a destiny to fulfill that was no less momentous than Dhri`s . Why was no one concerned about preparing me for it?”³

This statement apparently represents the subdued voice of a woman and her longing to identify herself in all walks of life. While the other women of her palace while away their time gossiping, she busies herself in read in and writing. She is reading Nyay Shastra when King Drupad informs that he intends to marry her through a swayamvara. She has already been informed by the immortal sage Ved Vyasa that she would have five greatest men of her time as her husbands which she hardly believes. Her reaction reveals her inner dissatisfaction.:

“We are nothing but pawns for king Drupad to sacrifice when it`s most to his advantage .At least I`m just going to be married off”⁴

Finally as destined, Draupadi is won by Arjun who has hidden his identity. The idealism prescribed by Hinduism is again responsible to break the comfort zone of this delicate princess who is bound to walk behind this brahmin bare feet and hungry after marriage:

“Each footstep on the cracked, burning path was agony. I was too proud to ask him to slow down ,even when I stumbled and fell. Gravel tore at my knees through the thin cotton of my sari. There were cuts on my palms. I bit at my lips to keep in tears of pain, of anger at my husband`s indifference”.⁵

Here we can clearly see that the code of conduct has been framed by this patriarchal society even in this Third Age of man in such a way that a woman is bound to share the sufferings of a man. There is no question of protest. Man`s will is supreme. Draupadi, the princess of Panchaal leads a hard life with her five husbands and mother-in-law Kunti, cooking brinjals in a smoke filled hearth. The idea of

getting married to five brothers seems very strange to king Drupad and his son first of all, but then, suggested by Ved Vyasa, he agrees to do so. Poor Panchaali who loves Arjun and only Arjun, is too helpless to give voice to her desire. She is left with no choice and blames Kunti for this development.

Gradually the circumstances change and Draupadi becomes the mistress of the Palace of Illusions, a unique palace built by Maya, the architect of gods and devils in Khandava, a barren land gifted to Pandavas by the blind king Dhritrashtra. Kauravas come to see it, Duryodhan is humiliated by Draupadi led by destiny and out of jealousy Kauravas also build one palace for themselves and invite Pandavas to see it. Draupadi also goes there. Yudhishthir has a very bad habit of playing dice and it leads to Draupadi's utter humiliation, never known in human history. Cheated by Shakuni and Duryodhan he loses his wife, brothers and all property. When Draupadi is called in the court by Duryodhan with the intention of humiliating her, she at first does not believe and retorts with pride:

"I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. 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."⁶

Poor Draupadi is stunned and shocked. She thinks that a husband who has lost himself first in gambling, has no right to wager his wife. She informs Duryodhan's messenger about it and feels safe. But then instructed by his brother, Dussasan, the devil incarnated, comes, catches her by hair and drags her down the palace corridors before the shocked eyes of servants and courtiers. Helpless Draupadi weeps, begs for mercy from the blind king, from her own husbands and even from Karna and Bheeshm but no one comes to aid her. In the court of the king, overcrowded with courtiers, Dussasen pulls her sari to make her naked and Duryodhan is pleased. In the words of Draupadi:

"I had shut my eyes. My body would not stop trembling though I willed it to. I clutched my sari in my fists- as though I could save myself with that futile gesture! The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me- I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time. Now they sat frozen as I struggled with Dussasan."⁷

Obviously this is the most horrible example of exploitation and humiliation of a woman in human history. Even women enjoying power, princesses and queens are equally vulnerable. They are totally marginalized and their voices remain unheard. Though history has also revealed it that whenever a woman is maltreated and disrespected, the results are destructive in the form of war, violence and bloodshed. Still such incidents continue to occur.

Thus the mistakes committed by Yudhisthir in the form of gambling result in twelve year's exile and one more year's hiding for Pandavas. Draupadi's condition is miserable. Her wounds are still green and she does not comb her hair, as she has taken an oath that she would comb them only after washing them in the blood of Duryodhan. During the last year of hiding, when they are supposed to stay unidentified, the Pandavas take shelter in the palace of king Virat. Draupadi enters there alone in the evening. Her suffering is obvious when she utters:

“All decent women were safe in their homes by this time .Besides, in my sari made of flattened bark, my crow's nest of hair that hadn't seen a comb in years, I must have looked like a mad woman. I tried to ignore their comments.....”⁸

A new problem emerges in the life of Draupadi when queen Sudeshna refuses to give job to Draupadi because of her beauty as she might attract her husband or her brother, but the moment lusty Keechak, sees Draupadi, he attempts to possess her and here again no one comes to help her, as if the moral character of the maid does not hold any importance. Led by lust Keechak makes amorous advances and then kicks Draupadi for not encouraging him, and the husbands are again silent, caring more for their disguised identity and promises, thinking least about the sufferings of their poor wife. Had the man been the victim, the woman would have forgotten all rules, all codes of conduct to save him. This partiality, this double standard is once again the question that is yet to be answered.

Finally with the death of Keechak their identity is revealed. Pandavas regain their honour in the court of Virat but it also leads them to the horrible battle of Mahabharat that lasted till eighteen days in which entire Kuru dynasty was destroyed. Pandavas gain victory but they are still unhappy and with the death of Krishna they perceive that their end is also near. They announce their Mahaprasthan, that is their final departure towards the mountain Himalaya which leads to heaven. Only the most pious soul can enter the gate of heaven. Draupadi also decides to leave the world with her husbands. Wearing the beaten tree bark she is ready to renounce the world. The journey is extremely difficult with chilly winds, mountain beasts and lack of food and shelter. After walking for some time Draupadi's feet lack sensation due to the snowy cold. When she calls Bheem to help her, Yudhisthir prevents him from going back. Poor Draupadi is once again left alone:

“ Resentment flared through me .Rules were always more important to Yudhisthir than human pain- or human love. I knew then that he alone would reach the gate of heaven, for among us only he was capable of shedding his humanity”⁹

Here ends the journey of Draupadi's life. Obviously her life was the other name of sufferings. Though she was fire incarnated, the princess, the wife of five greatest men on earth, yet she underwent great suffering and utter humiliation and that was due to the patriarchal social order that marginalized women even in that Third Age of Man.

Obviously through the character of Draupadi the novelist intends to give this open message to society that there has come a very small change in the status of women even today. Their voice is still unheard and marginalized. Newspapers reveal the increasing ratio of rape, exploitation, killings and violence towards women. The society also demands all sacrifice, all tolerance and sense of duty from women only. This attitude must be changed.

References

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