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PORTRAYAL OF MYTH IN CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S 'DRAUPADI' AND  
ANUJA CHANDRAMOULI'S 'ARJUNA'

MUTHAMIL M.S.<sup>1</sup>, S. BRINDA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Supervisor, PRIST Deemed University; Thanjavur

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, PRIST Deemed University; Thanjavur



ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to compare and contrast the mythical Draupadi as portrayed in Vyasa's *Mahabharatha* from the male point of view and the postmodernist Draupadi of Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* from the female point of view. The *Mahabharata* is an epic that has always managed to fascinate us. It is an ocean of learning in the sense that a new pearl of wisdom unearths every time you plunge in. Though there is a great deal one can learn from this longest epic in mankind's history, yet, at the core it remains a common issue of sibling rivalry, property dispute, subjugation of women and casteism. Arjuna, Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince by Anuja Chandramouli retells in riveting detail the story of the Pandava Warrior-Prince, Arjuna. This is an intense and human story of his loves, friendships, ambitions, weaknesses and follies, as well as his untimely death and revival, his stint as a eunuch and the innermost reaches of his thoughts. Told in a refreshingly modern and humorous style and set against the staggering backdrop of the *Mahabharata*, the novel appeals equally to the average, discerning reader and the scholar. In Anuja's eyes, Arjuna is very human and a strong-willed warrior who wants to be depended upon. He is fiercely competitive and a tad too proud. Drona, his guru, promises to make him the most powerful warrior on earth. Much of the story will be familiar to one who has previously read the *Mahabharata*.

INTRODUCTION

*The Mahabharata* is not only a spell-binding tale of complexity unparalleled, but the great epic also offers rare lessons for a better living and making the right choices in life. Arjuna won Draupadi in her swayamvara. Drupada intended that Arjuna alone win the hand of his daughter. The princess vying for Draupadi's hand had to shoot five arrows at a revolving target, while looking only at its reflection in a bowl. Drupada was confident that only Arjuna could accomplish this task. Arriving with his brothers disguised as Brahmins (priests), Arjuna successfully tackled the target, which other kings and princes were unable to accomplish. Karna was a suitor for Draupadi at her swayamvara. Unlike most other contenders, he was easily able to wield and string the bow, but Draupadi refused to allow him to take part. She rejected him for being a "suta-putra" - son of a charioteer.

While in exile, Kunti, mother of the Pandavas often advised her sons that they share everything they have equally amongst themselves. Upon returning home with Draupadi, on purpose, Arjuna said he had brought a prize. Kunti, unmindful of what Arjuna was referring to, unassumingly asked her son to share whatever it was with his brothers. Thus, in order to obey their mother's order all five accepted Draupadi as their wife. It is true that Arjuna was able to receive Draupadi's hand by completing a difficult and skilful task, but she was not a prize that he won because it was Draupadi's swayamvara; she had the right to choose her husband.

Arjuna proved himself worthy; Draupadi herself made the true decision. She could have married Karna who could have also performed the same task, but she denied him permission to participate. In certain ways, therefore, Arjuna degraded Draupadi by claiming her as a prize and he further insulted her by carrying out their mother's wish by treating her as if she were an object won in a contest. Yudhishtira and his four brothers were the rulers of Indraprastha under the sovereignty of King Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana who resided in the capital of the empire, Hastinapura was always jealous of his cousins and the wealth they had acquired by building Indraprastha. To take revenge on the Pandavas, his uncle Shakuni came up with a plan and together with his brothers, his friend Karna and maternal uncle Shakuni, they conspired to call on the Pandavas at Hastinapura and win their kingdoms in a game of gambling. Shakuni was skilled at winning by unfair means. The idea was that Shakuni would play against Yudhishtira and win at the gambling table what was impossible to win at the battlefield.

As the game proceeded, Yudhishtira lost all his wealth and kingdoms one by one. Having lost all material wealth, he went on to put his brothers at stake one by one and lost them too. Ultimately he put himself at stake, and lost again. All the Pandavas were now the servants of the Kauravas. But for Shakuni, the humiliation of the Pandavas was not complete. He prods Yudhishtira that he had not lost everything yet; Yudhishtira still had Draupadi with him and if he wished he could win everything back by putting Draupadi at stake. Yudhishtira walked into the trap and to the horror of everybody present, put Draupadi up as a bet for the next round. But Bhishma and Drona opposed this move recalling that a woman couldn't be put at stake even if it was their own wife.

However, Yudhishtira ignored their call and put her at stake much to the ire of Bhishma, who in his frustration broke his chair. Playing the next round, Shakuni won. Duryodhana ordered Dusshasana to drag Draupadi by the hair to the royal court before the great assembly of people and then to disrobe her completely. Karna calling her a public woman whether she was clothed or naked was immaterial. The wicked Dusshasana began to pull at her sari but Lord Krishna helped Draupadi and gave her an endless sari, one which could never be removed and thus protected her honour. This was a portrayal of Woman from Vyasa's perspective. In The Mahabharata, Draupadi was silenced by male chauvinism and societal structural power in the days of yore.

#### **PORTRAYAL OF MYTH IN CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S 'DRAUPADI' AND ANUJA CHANDRAMOULI'S 'ARJUNA'**

Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni has lent voice to Draupadi, making her the central character of the novel, The Palace of Illusions relating her tale from the feminist point of view. It is the portrayal of struggle by Draupadi to achieve equality, dignity, rights, and freedom from the patriarchal boundaries. Draupadi is portrayed as a brave and courageous character in the novel and loads of times, her will and character are put to test many a time. The Mahabharata ignored the rights of Draupadi but Divakaruni treated Draupadi as a normal human being who was made up of flesh and bone, bound with emotions and feeling as we have.

In retelling Draupadi's story, Divakaruni focuses on a number of themes. One is that of Draupadi's destiny. In the novel, as a child she hears Vyasa prophesize that "Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. Maybe, it will mitigate the catastrophes to come. There is of course no basis for such a love in the epic itself. Rather, by explaining the true reasons for why the world thought that these two hated each other, Divakaruni gets an opportunity to go

beyond the ordinary, masculine version of the epic. She also gets to put the spotlight on the tragic figure of Karna and show the greatness of his character. Here she is of course following a long Indian tradition. A reimagining of the world-famous Indian epic, the Mahabharata told from the point of view of the wife of an amazing woman.

The entire story is narrated through Panchaali, the wife of the five Pandavas, sister to Dhri and daughter of King Drupad. King Drupad has longed for the death of Drona, his ex-friend and now enemy. Panchaali grows up isolated from most people except for Dhai Ma, Krishna, and Dhri. To get her married, King Drupad calls for a swayamvar, where all of the princes and kings of Bharat (modern-day India) are invited, and Panchaali will choose her husband from them. However, to be eligible to marry Panchaali there is an unbelievably hard test of skill. Panchaali ends up marrying Arjun, a Pandava prince. However, she has really fallen in love with Karna, the Pandava's enemy.

Arjuna's mother Kunti accidentally tells all four of Arjun's brothers to share whatever it is that Arjun has brought causing Panchaali to have to marry all five of the Pandavas. Because of those five marriages, the Kauravas have to allow the Pandavas back into Hastinapur and Dhritarashtra is shamed into giving Yudhishthir his half of the kingdom. After many years of a happy reign in their own kingdom, Yudhishthir plays a rigged gambling game with Duryodhan and as a result the five Pandavas and Panchaali are banished into the forest for twelve years and they must spend their thirteenth year in exile undercover.

Only the birth of Parikshit, the grandson of Arjun pulls the five Pandavas and Panchaali out of their great depression. With Parikshit's birth all of the Pandavas throw their energy into loving Parikshit, and giving him the best education possible. Eventually, a messenger from Dwarka, the city of Krishna, brings the Pandavas the news that he is dead. With Krishna's death, the Pandavas realize that they have lived out their lives; there is no more point in their remaining alive. They give up their worldly possessions and leave for an ascetic life in the forest. All of Panchaali's husbands, except for Yudhishthir die and so do Panchaali; Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. The Mahabharata ignored the rights of Draupadi but Divakaruni treated Draupadi as a normal human being who was made up of flesh and bone, bound with emotions and feeling as we have.

Arjuna, Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince by Anuja Chandramouli retells in riveting detail the story of the Pandava Warrior-Prince, Arjuna. This is an intense and human story of his loves, friendships, ambitions, weaknesses and follies, as well as his untimely death and revival, his stint as a eunuch and the innermost reaches of his thoughts. Told in a refreshingly modern and humorous style and set against the staggering backdrop of the Mahabharata, the novel appeals equally to the average, discerning reader and the scholar. In Anuja's eyes, Arjuna is very human and a strong-willed warrior who wants to be depended upon. He is fiercely competitive and a tad too proud. Drona, his guru, promises to make him the most powerful warrior on earth. Much of the story will be familiar to one who has previously read the Mahabharata.

Anuja Chandramouli's Arjuna, Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince starts with Janamejaya, Parikshit's son and Arjuna's great-grandson. He asks Veda Vyasa (Holy Sire) to tell him all about his ancestors. He says he heard that Veda Vyasa wrote a poem, the finest, about his ancestors. He says "I yearn to learn every single thing about my great-grandfather Arjuna and his illustrious brothers. Tell me about the Great War in which they slew their cousins. Surely they would not have done such a thing without the utmost provocation? What was Krishna's role in the whole affair? It is believed that he was Vishnu incarnate and Arjuna was his most beloved friend and that they achieved marvelous things together. Tell me every small, insignificant detail about Arjuna. What did he like? What did he think? Who was the love of his life? What were the events the Gods dared not fight? Is it true that he was of divine origin, fathered by none other than Indra, the Lord of the heavens?

Arjuna was the son of Kunti Devi and Pandu, a scion of the illustrious Kuru clan. But unlike most mortals, he also had a divine father and the events surrounding his birth were mysterious and magical. One day Pandu (second son of Vichitravirya and Ambalika) went out hunting to relax from the challenges of government. Lost in the pleasure of the hunt, his cares slipped away even as bloodlust warmed his blood and

inflamed his senses. Suddenly he came upon a handsome deer sporting with its mate. Pandu took aim and let fly an arrow that flew true to its target and inflicted a mortal wound on the unsuspecting creature. As implacable fate would have it, the deer that lay in its death throes was in fact a rishi's son, who was himself a powerful ascetic. He had taken the form of a deer to camouflage the act of love with his wife in the sylvan glade. Made to die violently at that climactic moment, he directed his vengeful wrath at Pandu and cursed him: "Unworthy One! You saw it fit to take the life of an innocent creature at such an inopportune moment, you too, shall forfeit your life when you clasp your mate in sexual embrace" (A 18). He confided his distress to his wife Kunti, saying, "It is my duty to produce worthy sons who will carry on my name, make amends for my sins and enhance my legacy" (A 19).

Dronacharya came into Arjuna's life at a critical juncture in both their lives. The latter had been looking for a great teacher who would harness his tremendous drive and potential and mould him into an all-conquering knight in shining armour, an invincible one-man army who could realize the cause of his brothers as well as cement his own claim to immortality. Before commencing lessons, Drona sent for his pupils and had them assemble before him. He looked at them all in turn with his keen eyes and addressed them with solemn gravity: 'I have taken up a task of training you to excel in the art of war and I will not rest till I expect a special Gurudakshina. Who among you will pledge to give me whatever I ask for at the end of his training?' After his speech, Arjuna said, "I am Arjuna, the Pandava. I swear to you that at the end of my training, I will fulfill whatever it is you desire" (A 37).

Drona gave a test to the Pandavas and the Kauravas, He had a clay pigeon installed in the uppermost branch of a tree and summoned the princes. When they had all assembled in front of him, he gave them the instructions to sever the head of the bird on his command. All the princes except Arjuna were summoned one by one and Drona asked them all the same question, what they could see? and received similar answers, they could see the tree and the bird.

Finally, it was Arjuna's turn. He took his position, pulled back the bow string and waited. When Drona asked him to tell what he saw, the prince replied, "I see the head of the bird and nothing else." His teacher's face lit up on hearing this answer and on his command, Arjuna's arrow whizzed through the air, straight and true and buried itself in the head of the bird, bringing it down with a heavy thud. Drona embraced his pupil and applauded his superior skill (A 40).

Draupada had always wanted to marry off Draupadi to Arjuna. Draupadi made her appearance, clothed in the finest apparel, bedecked with jewellery and holding a garland in her hands. The vast assemblage gazed at her in speechless wonder and adoration. Many were so smitten with desire for her that they were willing to do anything to possess her. Arjuna married Draupadi. The Pandavas accompanied by Draupadi, went to the potter's hut where Kunti awaited them. Anxious to convey their happy tidings to her, they called out excitedly, "Mother! Come see what we have brought today!" Kunti replied absentmindedly from within: "Whatever it is, share equally amongst yourselves." The brothers were appalled at her words and could not bring themselves to look at each other. Kunti stepped out of the house and upon seeing Draupadi, was horrified at her careless utterance. The Pandavas thus came to acquire a common wife. The wedding of Draupadi to the Pandavas was celebrated with much pomp and splendor. They were happy with their common wife. She kept her feelings hidden within herself, "Yet till her dying breath, Draupadi secretly loved Arjuna more than his brothers" (A 77).

Duryodhana's uncle, Shakuni, hatched artful schemes to deprive the Pandavas of their kingdom and their possessions. Yudhishtira's fondness for dice was well known, even though he was not a skilful player. At this insistence of Duryodhana and against the wishes of the Kuru elders, Dhritarashtra sent Vidura to invite the Pandavas to a game of dice. Shakuni, playing on behalf of Duryodhana and using foul methods, cheated the guileless but gambling-addicted Yudhishtira into staking and losing the kingdom, his brothers, himself and finally his wife, Draupadi. Duhshasana dragged Draupadi by the hair and brought her before the gathering men, to be displayed as their slave. "Karna laughed at the Princess and told her, "You are now a slave of the

Kauravas and can no longer afford your haughty airs. Perhaps you should throw yourself at the feet of your masters and beg one of them to accept you as his wife" (A 115).

"Mark my words, Karna, I swear you will meet your end at my hands for the countless wrongs you have done us! Arjuna vowed" (A 116). Lord Krishna saved Draupadi from the critical situation. Then Draupadi swore that she would not tie up her lovely tresses, till Duhshasana had received his comeuppance at the hands of Bheema. They went Vanavasa for 14 years in the forest, during this time Arjuna worshipped many Gods and got all the Celestial weapons. After completing 13 years of the Vanavasa, they have to go for one year Agnanavasa, so the Pandavas disguised themselves. In this mean time, Arjuna changed his form as a eunuch. After their exile, The Pandavas came to Hastinapur and asked for their share. But Duriyodhana refused to give them not even a piece of land. Then the Kurushetra War broke out and in the War, Krishna became the charioteer of Arjuna. During the War, Abimanyu (Arjuna's son) was brutally murdered by the Kauravas, so Arjuna avenges the death of his son. Arjuna's thoughts were on Abhimanyu and he invoked a divine weapon called the Anjalika. In a clear voice, he uttered: "If I have been a good man who always stuck to the path of dharma, let this weapon find its mark and put an end to Karna's existence on Mother Earth.

## CONCLUSION

The years rolled by as all concerned put the battle firmly behind them and began rebuilding their lives. Arjuna was now completely involved in helping his brother run the Kingdom. Then the Pandavas made a solemn decision. Yudhishtira, with the help of his brothers, completed any pending tasks regarding the governance of his beloved subjects, and began arrangements to place Arjuna's grandson, Parikshit, on the throne.

Arjuna looked up at the majestic range and a wonderful sense of calm filled his soul. With every breath he took, he felt more and more detached from his human self and he noted the progress of his brothers and wife as if from a distance that kept increasing. And yet he had never seen them more clearly. As for himself, at the end of it all, Arjuna could say and rightfully so – that he was Arjuna, the best there ever was and the best there ever would be. Arrogance had always been Arjuna's weakness. His life flashes before his eyes and he realizes that his strength and his weakness were one and the same: his pride. This last thought accompanied him as he fell into the chasm of nothingness. His embodied soul freed itself and soared heavenwards to where Krishna, Abhimanyu and all the Brothers he had loved best, stood waiting to receive him.

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