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CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *PANCHAALI* – RE-TELLING TO RE-ASSERT

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Post-colonialism, in many ways is about re-writing and re-visioning. It focuses on giving the oppressed/suppressed a voice of its own and bringing the subaltern into the mainstream. Post-colonial works have existed way before the term even existed. A case in point would be Rabindranath Tagore's works which are not only about social issues, but also address gender issues which now have become one of the pivots of Post colonialism. Gender issues have been taken up by feminists who want to prove to the world that a woman too, has a voice of her own and that when the time comes, she can transform herself from the domestic help to a version of the Goddess *Kali* herself. One of the many ways in which this is realized is by providing the woman with a distinctive voice; one that truly and completely belongs to herself, and allowing her to tell her own story, her own point of view of things. Adrienne Rich defines this act as Re-visioning, ". . . the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni rewrites the story of *Panchaali* from her perspective, gives her the freedom to place her thoughts in front of the readers and also gives the reader a chance to revisit *The Mahabharata* from a woman's perspective through her novel *The Palace of Illusions*.

The need for *Panchaali*'s version of the story arises because Divakaruni is trying to free *Panchaali* from the stereotypical view of a woman who is docile, hardly ever heard from and a woman who is content with whatever it is that she receives. She in turn becomes a woman who makes her own life decisions, someone who stands up to the challenge. She does make a few mistakes along the way but that is part of human nature and hence cannot be avoided. Divakaruni has made it crystal clear that her *Panchaali* is to be treated like an ordinary human being and that attributing her with characteristics generally attributed to characters like Sita or Savitri in Indian mythology would be inaccurate. On this revolves the main crux of Divakaruni's story; she wants her *Panchaali* to be recognized, firstly and most importantly, as a human being – nothing more and nothing less.

Divakaruni's *Panchaali* reminds one of the omniscient speaker in Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*. Both women issue bold-faced challenges and come out of them not unscathed, but definitely victorious. The major difference that comes into play here is the concept of victory. Maya Angelou's black woman sings "Leaving behind nights of terror and fear/I rise/Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear." She moves into the future, into a morn where a woman can hold her head high. In the same way, at the end of Divakaruni's novel, *Panchaali* too rises into a realization, into eternal time where she says "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I am truly *Panchaali*." (Divakaruni 360) Both the black woman and *Panchaali* comprehend the fact that they are women and yet they are powerful. They are capable of not only shocking and scandalizing a patriarchal society, but can also bring it down in ruins.

In her introduction to *The Second Sex*, discussing the concept of the 'subject' and the 'object', de Beauvoir mentions that ". . . woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite

resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.” In Divakaruni’s Panchaali, a subtle shift is seen from this state. Panchaali tries hard to break free of this contentment and tries to create a niche for herself. Aiding this conversion is the statement that Dhri stresses on “... because you’re my sister, but also because you’re born to change history. You don’t have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary starstruck girl. The consequences of your actions might destroy us all. (Divakaruni 87) Divakaruni’s Panchaali is never satisfied with her role as the ‘Other’ and tries hard to break free of the mould that society and her father have set her in. She accompanies Dhri for all his lessons even though she knows that she will be chastised for it. Dhai Ma has to constantly remind her that she is a woman and a princess and has to behave in a certain way. She revolts and in her own words about the Pandavas, “played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny.”(Divakaruni 151) She shapes and reshapes the world she lives in constantly and the courage to do so comes from her surety that she would always hold a special place in the life of the Pandavas. She overcomes but at the same time, remains bound.

In Divakaruni’s novel, destiny plays the hand of patriarchy. Panchaali tries to change her fate, to change the course of destiny but understands that it is almost impossible to overcome. It is only when she has fulfilled her destiny that she is able to attain her heart’s desire. Her whole life has already been mapped and she is bound to follow it to the end. The one person who can save her from herself is Krishna, but he maintains a stoic silence and at the same time confuses her with his enigmatic smiles. He, teamed with Panchaali’s fate, takes on the role of typical male patriarchal society which forces a woman onto undesirable paths. Right from the beginning, she sees herself as “The Girl Who Wasn’t Invited.” (Divakaruni 1) She tries to romanticize the fact of her birth in many ways but fails to do so when faced with the harsh realities of life. She is aware of the prophecy of her birth that she will “...change the course of history” (Divakaruni 5) but is unaware that the undesirable responsibility will tear her life into two halves. She says, “I wanted it to be true. But did I have the makings of a heroine – courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me?” (Divakaruni 5) She fears if she will be able to stand up to the test when the time comes but fails to understand that her destiny has taken away any choice that she might have had. She fails to understand that the destiny/prophecy that she so eagerly wants to fulfill will lead her on paths best left untraveled.

The first sign of fight that Panchaali shows against her fate is also stifled by the holy man who claims “Only a fool meddles in the Great Design. Besides your destiny is born of lifetimes of Karma, too powerful for me to change.” (Divakaruni 40) As a woman, she is left with no choice but to follow the footsteps already made for her. The ‘Great Design’ here can be symbolically represented as the design or the blue-print which states that Man will always dictate what a woman should or should not do. Krishna too, by his complicated statements pushes Panchaali on the path drawn for her. Divakaruni has very cleverly broken away from the ‘Great Design’ of *The Mahabharata*. She has added extra dimensions to various characters and by doing so, freed them from the shackles that the Classical text bound them to.

Divakaruni has followed the trend of writers like Jean Rhys, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gilbert and Gubar in re-writing the stories of characters that readers have always taken for granted. She also follows in the footsteps of Bhasa, Tagore and Girish Karnad, who have achieved this very aim by re-visioning Indian myths and tales that are part of the Indians’ psyche and which cannot be uprooted easily. By doing so, Divakaruni has carved a name for herself in Post-colonial Indian Writing in English. She is in no way the first to do so and in no way will be the last, but at the same time, she has struck a chord with her version of Panchaali’s story.

Bhasa, in his *Urubhangam – The Shattered Thigh* provides the reader with a three-dimensional figure of Duryodhana. The readers see Bhasa’s Duryodhana not just as a villain but more so as a tragic hero. Bhasa gives his Duryodhan a chance to redeem himself. He realizes that he has played his part in the war of Kurukshetra and most of what has happened is due to him and that he cannot escape the consequences of his actions. At that moment, he ceases to be the Duryodhana of Valmiki’s *Mahabharata* but becomes Bhasa’s Duryodhana. The same happens with Panchaali. Once she uses her voice to speak out for herself, to tell the readers her side of the story, she ceases to be Valmiki’s Panchaali, but becomes Divakaruni’s Panchaali.

Perhaps the more relevant comparison of Panchaali would be to Tagore's Chitra. Tagore's Chitra too, falls in love with Arjuna but is able to voice her grievances against the great warrior. She even succeeds in gaining the respect of the greatest warrior by showing him her true self – Chitra, the warrior princess and not Chitra, the beautiful woman. Panchaali also gains the respect of the five Pandava brothers and becomes an inseparable part of their lives but at what cost? The cost of her love – Karna. She is compelled to give him up and the only place that he finds in her life is in her dreams. Chitra too has to give up Arjuna in the end but promises to bring his son up as a great warrior. Both stories are important and inalienable parts of the *Mahabharata* but what is different between them is the kind of treatment they have merited. Tagore gives Chitra a choice and she makes her own bed. She chooses to be part of Arjuna's life even if it is for a brief moment. But, Panchaali has been robbed of her options by Divakaruni. She is compelled to lie on a bed already made for her. In her case, it is five beds. The only place where she can finally attain her love is in the afterlife and her entire life still remains a puzzle to her. She says, "I try hard to comprehend what he means. I know it is critical that I do so. But his words baffle me. I don't feel divine. With this body dissolving away, my thoughts fraying, I feel as though I'm less than nothing." (Divakaruni 359) Whereas on the other hand, Chitra has the luxury of having her life's wish and desire fulfilled. She also understands that she was meant to be a brief part of Arjuna's life and that "The gift that I proudly bring you is the heart of a woman. Here have all the pains and joys gathered, the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of the dust; here love springs up struggling toward immortal life. Herein lies an imperfection which yet is noble and grand." (Tagore 20) Both women are noble, grand and remain unbeatable till the end of the respective literary works. The thoughts, ideals may be different but they still exist on the same plane.

Based on this connection, there remains one major question that must be asked. Why is it that authors, be it Tagore with his *Chitra* and *Chandalika* or Mahasweta Devi with her *After Kurukshetra: Three Stories* or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with her *The Palace of Illusions* choose to go back into the past, into stories that have been conceived years ago and passed on for centuries hence? Why is it that they choose to reflect on texts that are part of the Indian epics, myths and tales? The answer is simple. It is because the characters in these myths and legends are immortal and continue to remain so. By picking characters from these stories, these authors are providing readers a glimpse into a world that is inherently Indian and inalienably part of the Indian psyche.

Characters like Draupadi and Sita become have been made unfair representations of all Indian women. By breaking them out of their stereotypical roles, the writers have also tried to free millions of Indian women who have known only one side of a Sita or a Draupadi. They have provided women a chance to interpret these characters in their own ways. Karnad, in his *Hayavadana*, portrays Padmini as a woman who wants the best of two worlds. In the context of the 18th century, what she wished for might be considered blasphemy but in a modern and post-modern context, can Padmini be seen as wrong? She wishes that her husband is both intellectually and physically strong. Karnad has delved into the psyche of a woman and allows the readers to build upon it. Divakaruni's Panchaali is not wrong when she falls for Karna, she is not wrong when she desires to fulfill her destiny without any bloodshed, and she is not wrong when she tries to break free. This is the message that these writers seem to be sending across – that everyone has the right to live their life the way they want to. And this factor is what makes the main theme of such writings, humanism. The writers may focus on female characters, but they are also drawing a larger picture that the readers fail to see.

The best way in which such writers can educate is by doing what Divakaruni says about the art of storytelling, through Dhri as her mouthpiece. "Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing.... Dhri was still dissatisfied. "You're looking at the story through the wrong window," he said. "You've got to close it and open a different one. Here I'll do it."" (Divakaruni 15) By retelling the stories that readers love and cherish, these authors educate about the basic ideas that constitute humanity; the basic ideas that make the world go round. By providing the readers with a different perspective, they are allowing them to let their inhibitions go free and become co-creators, not only of stories that have already existed, but also stories of their own. By being creative, they have passed on to the readers, the power of creation and creativity. And the best reply that the readers can give them- again through the words of Divakaruni, but this time through the mouth of Panchaali – "I'm taking back the story." (Divakaruni 16) It is

time that women reclaim their rights to equality and write and design their own stories instead of living in borrowed tales of bygone years.

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