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Research Article



Counter-Narrative as a Powerful Narrative Technique for the Voice of the Voiceless in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

India is a land of myth and legends. Indian epics are archives of our history and precedent culture which depicts what happened in the times of yore. They tell us about the events and developments that shaped our culture. Epics dole out as a testimony of our culture. Many Indian writers craft their plot from epics of Hindu mythology which is used as a literary device. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses Hindu mythology in her works broadly to instill audacity in her woman protagonists. She tries to demonstrate how myths steer women to surmount their conflicts in life. Her novels explicate how myths instruct humanity to lead a virtuous life. Draupadi, the heroine of *The Mahabharata* is presented through a fictional perspective in Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*, (2008). It is a retelling of *The Mahabharata*, from

the perspective of Draupadi. She breaks the stereotype of a conventional heroine in Indian literature. Counter-narration is a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often misrepresented or untold. It is also a tool for uncovering, examining, and stimulating mainstream historical texts. The author uses counter-narrative techniques in the novel to counter the position of women in The Mahabharata era addressing the prejudice, difficulties, and the male dominance that they had experienced. A descriptive analysis enumerates upon the author's use of the counter-narrative technique in the novel through a detailed description of plot, settings, and characterization. Divakaruni amidst of suffering has overcome the predicaments she faced challenging the old age convention that women must accept tradition and society without questioning. Draupadi could endeavour the subversion where most women would have given up. Narrative technique is the art of narrating a story in a literary work by using various techniques. The narrative technique is vastly an aesthetic enterprise. The feature of the narrative includes characters with clear personalities or identities and integrated dialogues. Through Draupadi's life author dispels outdated notions about what it means to be a woman. The author explores the ancient and personal experiences of Draupadi, as distinct from the original Mahabharata. Draupadi ends up being the most nuanced and divisive female character in Hindu literature. Draupadi is an archetypal representation of the pain and humiliation a woman experiences in a patriarchal society. The lives of women have not changed over time, whether it is the ancient or the modern era. There are still challenges to overcome the situations that call for specific actions. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates the hardships a princess-born woman had to endure.

Keywords: Counter-Narrative, Critical Race Theory, Gender resistance, Resilience, Narrative technique, Stories of resistance, Myth, Modernity, Voice of the Voiceless, Patriarchy, Humiliation, Archetype, Feminism, Identity, Stereotype, Intercultural dialogue

Introduction

India is a land of myth and legends. Indian epics are archives of our history and precedent culture which depicts what happened in the times of yore. They tell us about the events and developments that shaped our culture. Epics dole out as a testimony of our culture. Many Indian writers craft their plot from epics of Hindu mythology which is used as a literary device. The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, the two classical epics of India are well thought-out as the greatest works of ancient classical literature. Written in ancient Sanskrit, both epics characterize the ethnic memory of the Indian people. Even in their current form for millennia, myths act as a powerful tool for humanity to lead a life of righteousness. The Indian epics enlighten people on how to become a good human beings and the importance of having truthful associations in life. It invariably creates an Indian national consciousness of spreading love and tolerance, bringing to light the value of truth and the importance of self-sacrifice.

The central theme of the Mahabharata encompasses the principles of Truth and Righteousness. This monumental epic engenders an ethical awakening within its readership, compelling them to adhere to the tenets of 'Sathya' (truth) and 'Dharma' (righteousness). *The*

Mahabharata is a brilliant portrayal of ancient political principles that talk about the importance of following one's assigned duties in life. And also shows the extent to which people can let go off their principles to gain some selfish desires.

The epic heroine Draupadi is characterised from a new perspective through the casement of counter-narrative technique. Draupadi's life in the epic demonstrates the old age convention that women must accept tradition and society without questioning. The lives of women have not changed over time, whether it is in the ancient or the modern era. There are still challenges to overcome, the situations that call for specific actions. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates the hardships a princess-born woman had to endure. Throughout the entire novel, Draupadi's life was to dispel outdated notions. It presents a fresh rendition of Draupadi's voice as the voice of the voiceless.

Counter- Narrative

Counter storytelling is a technique for amplifying the experiences; narratives and realities of underprivileged populations. Counter-narratives take account of stories of confrontation and clash as put in to the picture and framed by individuals and social groups. Counter-narratives bring out stories questioning and opposing on the social settings professed by the dominant and powerful narratives made by the powerful. Counter-narratives deconstruct and disrepute the themes of dominant narratives by addressing the underlying logic and counteracting it. Counter-narratives aim to offer individuals and social groups an alternative, non-hostile conceptual framework, with the intention of precluding violent radicalization and antagonism that arise from narratives espoused by various parties.

In contrast to perceived dominating and forceful master narratives, counter-narratives have an impact on social contexts. Counter-narrative is a potent discourse technique that explores the narratives of people whose experiences were frequently misunderstood or even silenced by the prevailing society. The author uses counter narrative as a device for uncovering, representing, and inspiring the female characters who were not given a chance to stand on their own in *The Mahabharata*.

Draupadi, the heroine of *The Mahabharata* is restated from the viewpoint of Draupadi. The novelist breaks the stereotype of a conventional heroine exploring the ancient and personal experiences of Draupadi. She emerges as an effigy of gender and resistance empowering women because of her strong volition, brilliance, and pride-fullness which mark her as a dignified woman. The prejudice, difficulties, and male dominance are portrayed through Draupadi as a role model for women and anyone who choose to reject injustice. She stands apart from other women because of her renowned capacity to conquer adversity. Draupadi ends up being the most nuanced and divisive female becoming an archetypal representation of the pain and humiliation a woman experiences in a patriarchal society. She was always prepared to retaliate or to exact harsh revenge for any wrongs done to her.

Voice of the voiceless

The transition of the protagonist Draupadi from a voiceless to the voiced, her quest for justice in a patriarchal world is presented through the window of counter narration. Draupadi's first-person narration of her experiences and emotions forms the main focus of the book. Divakaruni succeeds in addressing the problems associated with the authority of power that

was exerted on women through masculine literature and has re-constructed using a new reality and truth in which women are given a voice through a process of on-going interrogation or dialogism.

Varied facets of Draupadi's psyche are presented to represent as a strong, independent woman who is capable of both kindness and wrath. Divakaruni in her author's note opines:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women...they remain shadowy figures their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever wrote a book...I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits. (Divakaruni, xiv-xvi)

Many people believe Draupadi to be a woman out for revenge. She emerged out bravely amongst the few women in Hindu tradition that was assertive and expressed her views in a realm dominated by men. Draupadi was a perfect embodiment of Shakti (Hindu deity) and a revered. She wasn't a submissive woman coerced into polyandry, nor was she a vengeful, angry woman. For the first time, Draupadi has been portrayed as an empress who genuinely cared about her subjects and served as a true Shakti to her emperor Yudishtira. Draupadi deserves to be given the same prominence as Sita. When her husband mistreats her, Sita remains silent; Draupadi does not. She had developed into an assertive woman who spoke her views in a society where women preferred to suffer in silence. Because of her strong resolve, Draupadi becomes a symbol of empowering women.

The Narrative of Draupadi

Draupadi is the epitome of kindness. She was the woman who, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, "If you can keep your head when all about you, are losing theirs and blaming it on you, If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you" (*If*, Kipling lines 1-3). She kept her crown while everyone around her lost theirs. Naturally, she emerged as the everlasting empress. She was projected as an extremely gorgeous, gifted and righteous woman. She emerges as the strong woman in Hindu Lore who spoke her mind and reacted antagonistically in the world of men. Draupadi, who is often seen as the supreme radical of Hindu mythology in the counter-narratives, was told by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with much consideration. This character will resonate with every reader throughout space and time. Divakaruni describes every situation in which Draupadi has had to make significant sacrifices in her life.

The narrative of Draupadi begins by describing how she was born as 'Yagnaseni' (born of sacrificial fire), and how the narrative then immediately shifts to Draupadi's 'swayamvara' (marriage). The narrative details Draupadi's upbringing in Panchala and her relationships with her father and brothers, the initial strife in her marriage, and her relationships with her husbands, her role as an emperor and how she handled her independence, as well as her relationships with King Yudhishtira, her insult in the court during Vastraharan (disrobe), her role as a mother, and finally her relationships with Lord Krishna, a friend who held a special place in Draupadi's life.

Draupadi remains as a subject of interpretations and interpolations today as one of the most dramatic and complicated characters. She is still burning in the inferno that she was born

into. In Divakaruni's eyes, Draupadi represents self-determination, honour, poise, and inspiration. Draupadi has consistently been blamed for starting the Kurushethra war, and she is also blamed for not having self-control.

Critical Race Theory

A main precept of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is countering the age-old perceptions of beliefs, attitudes and notions which are primarily employed in writings to elevate minority voices, views, and experiences. Regardless of how well-informed it is, critical race theory is now used as the foundation for all diversity and inclusion initiatives. By using this technique, the novelist challenges the narratives of the dominant culture to give voice to those who might not otherwise have them. These narratives don't always refute the conventional beliefs, but instead show how they work. Draupadi's psyche is breached by Divakaruni, who makes her aware of how alone she felt as a result of being surrounded by wealth and luxury. She observes the other women in the area, ladies who are hidden from view while the court is in session and women who are married off to elderly kings as soon as they reach puberty, and she realizes that she is made for more. This fiery-eyed little princess is aware that her life will change and that she will play a significant role in that change.

Draupadi has shown generosity, liberality and compassion at each and every instance. A woman who is frequently shown as a lesser subject in patriarchal narratives transforms into the most powerful figure, upending the traditions that have historically been used to define her gender. By acting as the storyteller and the agent of action, Divakaruni's Draupadi restores the voice of women. Draupadi, one of the strongest female characters of the epic has drawn the interest of authors, critics, and academics due to the complexity of her persona. This mysterious figure has been the subject of numerous recent literary works, receiving a fresh perspective from feminist authors who either see her as a victim of patriarchal social ideology or as a strong woman who fights oppressive power structures using techniques that are specific to her personality.

Divakaruni's Draupadi takes on an androcentric focus and provides the overall narrative. She conjures up a story world where Panchali's views and feelings are called into question, giving the tale an extraordinarily fresh angle. Panchali is brought to the forefront in Divakaruni's story, which serves to dispel the longstanding stereotyped perception. She speaks out for her independence and rights and challenges the largely male perceptions of how women are portrayed in literary works. She is a menace to men because of her strength and tenacity. She kept her ground and expressed her resentment whenever she felt insulted. Given the period, location, and community she lived in, that was an extremely bold and impressive act on her part. Draupadi discovered strength within herself to battle the injustices meted out to her by harsh males in a male-dominated culture.

Gender Resistance and Resilience

Draupadi becomes a role model for gender resistance and resilience because of her tenacity and bravery. She turns out to be a divisive woman who straddles the line of subordination. She herself turns out for a "Dharma-yudh" (war fought with righteousness) against injustice. As Ganguli writes "At time of her birth, a celestial voice had proclaimed, that this unparalleled beauty has taken birth to uproot the Kauravas and establish the rule of

religion” (Ganguli,1990). The violence inborn in her words is incontrovertible when Draupadi takes a decision not to forgive the Kauravas for what they have done. She decides not to tie her hair. Throughout the rest of The Mahabharata until the conclusion of the Battle of Kurukshetra, Draupadi uses the two undeniable symbols of unbound hair and blood to show off her shame.

Divakaruni has courageously brought forth the voice of Draupadi, throwing a new light on Draupadi’s character which has made people re-read the epic to understand the real role of Draupadi in the epic. Draupadi comes into sight as the most enigmatic and magnificent woman for all ages because of her fire and vitality, her will to fight for justice, and her diversity. Since her creation, her character has been interpreted in a huge variety of ways in several works. Draupadi turn out to be an icon of empowered women. As Das opines, “Mahabharata is an intricate women saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem” (Das, 231). Draupadi’s voice redefine herself emphasizing the truth of her own presence. This marked her as a distinguished woman preceding her identity as a human, not as an artifact.

Counter stories

Draupadi has evolved out as a toiling woman who overcomes a male-dominated society to become a powerful lady, as a woman with wisdom and maturity who is entirely different from other interpretations. The novel depicts Draupadi as a valiant and fearless girl who has her strength of character, who battle for equality, respect, rights, and escape from patriarchal constraints. Draupadi has always been one of the most enigmatic and majestic heroines for all eras because of her spirit of fighting for justice and her diversity. Draupadi tells and acts out her own life story without the author’s involvement; this is one of the most accurate interpretations of her tale. She gives the protagonist a voice in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society by portraying Panchaali’s existence as a sequence of decisions she took for herself.

The book recounts the epic tale of pride, love, and retribution as well as the innermost desires of a girl who has always wanted to be a man. Divakaruni penetrates the mind of Draupadi, a wealthy young woman who suffers from excruciating loneliness. When she observes the women around her, who are hidden from view while the court is in session and who are married off to old kings as soon as they reach puberty, she realises that she was created for more. This young princess with fire eyes is aware that she will change the world and make a difference in people’s lives. Retellings have the ability to enhance our understanding of the original narrative.

Personal accounts of racism and sexism narrate an individual’s experience with various forms. Alleyn Diesel subverts the superior position enjoyed by men of patriarchal nature when he opines Draupadi as a woman "regarded by many men as a prize, valuable object to be competed for and squabbled over, and she becomes the central reason for internecine conflict, which brings disorder (adharma) and devastation to society" (Diesel, 9). Through the novel, Divakaruni is accompanying the life of Draupadi whose story is being often said from the patriarchal viewpoint. Divakaruni unravels the counter-narrative features in the novel through her unique storytelling technique where she portrays the journey of Draupadi in an entirely enigmatic manner. She also connects with the struggle and circumstances of women in the

male-dominated period by depicting the daring nature of women, and their fortitude to live a happy life fighting against all odds in an androcentric society.

Conclusion

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi highlight the resilience and control through which Draupadi was projected as a threat to men. Draupadi questions against the mistreatment of women, particularly within their own families. Men continue to advance their tyrannical deeds if women continue to be silent because men know that most women would suffer in silence. However, Draupadi was one among the few exceptions in epics who stood her ground and voiced her displeasure whenever she felt offended. Divakaruni creates dialogue that critically illuminates the concepts, ideas and experiences faced by Draupadi in her life. It emerged as a Counter story that can put together individuals, especially of those who are at the margins of society. Counter-narratives have carved a niche in this gradually changing multi-ethnic world. a. Intercultural dialogue brings stories and voices of people of diverse populations exclusively those who are still marginalised. Researchers worldwide understand the potential of Counter-narratives in today's socio-political contexts and the need to focus more in the area. Draupadi never claimed herself as a weak and disgraced woman of her time. The ancient epic shows her calm and of moderate nature but has never focused on the strong nature of Draupadi. Divakaruni portrayed Draupadi as a character who is as strong as the male characters through her novel, according to Tuchman, "Books are the barriers of civilization, which leads to the development of civilization. They are the engine of change" (Tuchman, BrainyQuote.com). Divakaruni was daring enough to counter the epic Mahabharata from the patriarchal point of view to a female point of view. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is given central importance attributing all the human qualities. Mythology has been the underpinning foundation of many civilizations and cultures. Greek and Roman evolution forms the basis of formation of Western mythology. India has inherited from the rich tradition of its own legends which is traditionally and religiously more spirited and philosophical. In the modern era, women take the courage to accept new realities and challenges. It is indispensable for a woman to be amply self-assured and strong. Women characters like Draupadi turn out to be an example for others to overcome the harsh realities of life. She turns out to be a fire goddess who comes from the flames with a godlike proclamation for being a warrior of evil forces. Draupadi, never made herself let down despite of all the tantrums and disgrace that were afflicted upon her by the men of her own family. Divakaruni unravels Draupadi's unique journey of resistance using the counter-narrative features in an entirely different manner. The courageous nature of women and their determination to live a happy life is well depicted through a synthesis of traditional legends and contemporaneous of the present world.

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