

Rethinking Relationships in the Fictional Retellings of the *Mahabharata*

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Michael Cronin in *Translation and Identity* (2006) discusses the different ways in which translation has played a crucial role in shaping debates about identity and other cultural codes in the past and the present. Transcreation is an art of adapting a text into another language. The idea of modifying, retelling, and reworking a text in the same language has been in practice for long. Therefore, especially in the case of classics and religious texts, we find different versions of the same story with major or minor variations from the original/source text. Literary recreation depends on the creative and the critical ability of the translator to transcreate a text on their own in their target language. Translating identity, on the other hand, would include forming, reforming, and deforming identities. The idea of one's identity gets established in relation to other identities of the text. Thus, transcreation leads to formation and felicitation of identities through negotiations and dialogues with the dominant and the 'silent' (277) voices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), reframes the epic Sanskrit poem, *Mahabharata*. Consisting of more than 100,000 couplets and a series of myths, the *Mahabharata* revolves around the dynastic struggle for power between the Pandavas, or sons of Pandu, and their cousins, the Kauravas, the sons of King Dhritrashtra. The story is set in Dwapar Yuga, yet is timeless in themes and motifs. This epic weaves history, religion, philosophy, statecraft, and myth with innumerable stories-within-stories. The epic was initially called *Jaya*, renamed as *Vijaya*, then called *Bharat Varsha* and then finally, it was called *Mahabharata*.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) too is a fictional retelling of the *Mahabharata* which deals with the life, voices, questions, and visions of Draupadi. The very cover page of the book calls it Panchaali's *Mahabharata*. This seems significant as here is a text by Panchaali, from Panchaali, and for Panchaali. Through her narrator, the wife of Pandava brothers, Divakaruni gives a rare feminist approach to an epic like the *Mahabharata*. For Divakaruni, the ways in which women have so far been portrayed in these epics have neither been satisfying nor appropriate. Instead, she believes the *Mahabharata* is full of powerful and complex women characters who have significantly affected the course of the action in several ways, yet they have never been more than "shadowy figures" (xiv), their "roles ultimately subservient to those

of their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons” (xvi). In this paper I shall scrutinise Divakaruni’s attempt in unfolding the different layers of the epic from Draupadi’s point-of-view and her relationship with other characters and how far is she successful in providing a different dimension to these characters and the story, by giving her a powerful “voice” of her own (xv). Attempts will also be made to compare and contrast this with the approach of Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi’s text “Draupadi.”

Right from her fiery birth, a gift beyond what king Drupad had asked for, Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*, is seen asserting her rights and position in the story. She is extremely unhappy with the name given to her. ‘Draupadi’, meaning daughter of Drupad, did not fall within the bounds of acceptability to a girl who is supposed to change the course of history.

My years in my father’s house would have been unbearable had I not had my brother. I never forgot the feel of his hand clutching mine, his refusal to abandon me. Perhaps he and I would have been close even otherwise, segregated as we were in the palace wing our father had set aside for us- whether from caring or fear I was never sure. But that first loyalty made us inseparable. We shared our fears of the future with each other, shielded each other with fierce protectiveness from a world that regarded us as not quite normal and comforted each other in our loneliness. (Divakaruni 7)

Though we know Draupadi had other names as well for herself - Panchaali, in the originals, yet if we consider this as a deliberate fictional manipulation on the part of the author, she is quite successful in doing so. After all, like Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni’s Draupadi asserts herself on various occasions. To quote her from the text:

But daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn’t been expecting me, but couldn’t my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice, but in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name. (Divakaruni 5)

Further, in the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni brings certain changes in the events and incidents. She makes Draupadi not only the narrator, the central protagonist of the novel, but Vyaasa and also beyond. She quotes Vyaasa at places and goes on to add on her own. Draupadi has all human weaknesses- she is a jealous woman, a self-obsessed wife, a shrewd daughter-in-law but apart from these, we also find her to be a brave, patient woman with no fear of what fate has to offer her. Her markers of identity are her name, her thoughts,

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aspirations, expectations, the language she uses and the action she executes. She is very vocal and strongly opinionated. For instance, her thoughts on Gandhari's acceptance of lifelong blindfolded eyes are:

I wondered if there were days when she regretted her decision to opt for wifely virtue instead of the power she could have had as the blind king's guide and adviser. But she'd made a vow and was trapped in the net of her own words. Her mouth was strong, though, and her pale, beautiful lips balanced disappointment with resolution. (Divakaruni 76)

Divakaruni is successful in carrying out this by shifting the pattern of narration now and then and making it non-linear, conversational, in flashback mode with the help of dream-sequence, interior monologues among others. The narrative technique can also be seen as an aesthetic move here. A narrator detains the past, holds the present and prepares the reader for the future. Some of the features of narratives include characters with stark personalities, deeply embedded dialogues, where time may travel to the present or to the future. Such narrative patterns also contribute in rethinking the relationships between characters. Chitra Banerjee has grappled with contemporary issues and a variety of themes: motherhood, marriage, individualisation, marginalisation, woman as a wife, mother, sister, and lastly, yet significantly, woman as human, not just as an object. To quote the words of the tutor of Dhri, "the woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have an opportunity to fulfil a heroic destiny." (26).

Unlike the tutor, she seems sceptical about tradition, the power structure of the society and it is through her mode of narration, the back and forth pattern of it, that she tries to disclose, display, unveil, reveal the secrets and silences of the source texts. The sage who warns Draupadi of the worst and predicts the future for her also unveils very many secrets in the book. He says:

Only a fool meddles in the Great Design. Besides, your destiny is born of lifetimes of karma, too powerful for me to change. But I'll give you some advice. 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 are shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. (40)

If we take Draupadi as a modern woman, her assertion of rights is just the first step to claim one's position in the *Mahabharata*. It is she alone who

questions Karna's birth right before her swayamvar "before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father's name. For surely a wife-to-be, who must sever herself from her family and attach herself to her husband's line, has the right to know this" (95).

Also, the autonomy of desire exercised by her in matters like—her secret admiration/attraction for Karna in one way liberates her from the 'trap' (89) of a man's world. Her keeping an eye on Karna at all times, in Indraprastha as well as in Hastinapur, whenever he is before her, her elegantly dressing up for him in the Rajasuya Yagya thinking of how he would respond to it, her constant comparison of the five Pandavas to Karna during the period of her exile shows complex and confusing feelings for Karna. At times, she can be seen as a devoted wife who wants to have Arjun as her only husband, at other places she yearns for Karna. In the battle of Mahabharata, after Karna's death, regret racks her. She could not hold back her tears, the longing that she suppressed all these years' crashes over and she believes there is still a part of her which is not loyal to the Pandavas. But even the dying Karna could never come to know about Draupadi's secret desire for him. This secret never unfolds for him. Draupadi at one point says, "I confess: in spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again. Each time I entered a room, I glanced up under my veil- I couldn't stop myself-hoping he was there." (208)

Draupadi's relationship with Kunti, as depicted by Divakaruni, is also an area of probing. When the Pandavas bring her to meet their mother, Kunti for the first time, she wants her to be equally shared among all her five sons. Divakaruni tries to pen down Draupadi's feelings as closely as she could. It seems as though an accidentally spoken word later became/ had to become her decision. Possible reasons for this could be Kunti being a kind of woman who would not like her sons to be lured away, wanted all five of them to have one wife. Also, politically sound, she cunningly and cruelly decides on Draupadi's fate to keep her sons united. She treats her like a commodity that can be shared and ought to be shared. Draupadi, though, is highly offended by her remarks when she addresses her as 'this woman' (108) and goes on to say, "This woman! As though I were a nameless servant. It angered me, but it also hurt...Now I saw how naive I'd been. A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away" (Divakaruni 108).

It is Kunti again who proposes Karna before the battle of Kurukshetra to leave the Kauravas and take sides with Pandavas and accept Draupadi as his wife. Though Draupadi fights back all domestic battles with Kunti quite well, Divakaruni in her retelling could not let her change any course of events when it comes to sharing herself among five husbands.

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The title of the book, *The Palace of Illusions*, is also very significant. It is not only the title of the book but the name of their magical palace which Maya had built for them. This was the name picked up by Draupadi for their new palace. In the book, it seems that the magic, the charm of this illusionary palace is equally responsible for the battle of Kurukshetra. Duryodhana is so intimidated by its grandness and its skilled magic that he desires to have a similar/better palace. Draupadi's smile when he fell in the pool disturbs him as much as to see what his brothers had made of the wilderness.

When we talk of the politics of representation, it is imperative to understand the other side of the story. In all popular versions of *Mahabharata*, it appears that we only listen to the major thread of incidents and stories but even then, there is a clear perspective of the author that helps to frame the mind of the readers. There is an omniscient narrator who guides us through. It is this that Divakaruni tries to unsettle through her text, *The Palace of Illusion*. Draupadi observes, explores and inhabits territories which do not belong to her in the source text. It is a human story about a woman trapped in a man's world, quite insensitive to her needs and wants.

One of the most significant episodes in the Mahabharata is the incident where Draupadi is wagered and lost by Yudhisthira to the Kauravas in the game of dice, and later she is stripped in the Kaurava court. Iravati Karve in her critical commentary on the Mahabharata, *Yuganta* (1969), proposes that Draupadi had no legal right to question the authority of Yuddhishtira over her. Draupadi—a queen, a princess, a wife and above all a human being—seems to have been gambled away like a bag of coins. But still, she believes her elders, Bheeshma, in particular, would come to her rescue and not let this happen. But she is mistaken, even the laws of men could not save her from all the humiliation. In this book particularly, Krishna comes to her rescue and she is convinced that they, Dussasan and other Kauravas, should be ashamed of shattering the bounds of decency instead of her. However, this conviction on her part also shows her autonomous power—her voice or inner strength. It is then that she realises her power over her husbands is a myth and for them nothing matters except duty and honour. She takes a counter position and goes on to say:

A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. (195)

Right after this episode, she takes an oath before the court that eventually leads to the battle of Kurukshetra.

Unlike Divakaruni's Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" has a different plot for the same setting. Her Draupadi walks naked, with her head high before the Senanayaks. She is an unarmed, naked body with no Krishna beside her. She is her own Krishna who alone can terrify the rest. Her breasts are bitten, nipples torn, but her walking naked, abandoning her clothes is her 'hope against hope'. Going closer to him, she says, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? Then spits blood on his white shirt and says she won't allow him to clothe her, daring him to counter her" (Devi 402).

Later she does not allow the Senanayaks to put on her clothes for she does not consider them to be 'man' enough (402). One might find her strange in asserting herself in such a way, but that is how she chooses it to be. Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time, Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. Her equation with society has completely changed and evolved for the better. She is no longer dependent on any external agency to rescue her. Even in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi during her stripping says, "let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency" (Divakaruni 193).

Draupadi's strange relationship with Krishna is also an area of probing here as the plot seems to deviate from the dominant narrative. Her dependency on Krishna, rather than on her husbands, at the moment of crisis, is more like a puzzle. At the beginning itself we know that it is Draupadi alone who is "the match" (76) for Krishna. He calls her Krishna – the blue one and the one who cannot be avoided. Krishna is not only a God but her sakha, a friend or mate, maybe her partner. In her own words, "It struck me like an iron fist, the realisation that if Krishna wasn't in my life, nothing mattered. Not my husbands, not my brother, not this palace I was so proud of, not the look I longed to see in Karna's eye" (165). Even in the Rajasuya Yagya, in the fight between Krishna and Sisupala, Draupadi feels a strange and desperate urge to save Krishna than anybody else on Earth. Such concerns cannot be explained and so her relationship with Krishna too remains unresolved in the entire book.

The novel concludes by all six of them, Draupadi and the five Pandavas, going for the mahaprasthan. At such critical juncture too, when Yuddhisthira, the symbol of Dharma, decides to move ahead in this final journey, she remembers Karna as "Karna would never have abandoned me thus. He would have stayed back and held my hand until we both perished. He would have happily given up heaven for my sake" (347).

It is Draupadi who falls first on her way, followed by four of the Pandavas

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leaving Yudhisthira alone for his heavenly abode. This is very symbolic. It seems as if once the string, that is Draupadi, of the necklace is broken, the beads, the Pandava brothers, start falling one by one. Draupadi was the string, and after her fall, the rest too disintegrate except Yudhisthira, the central one- the representative of Dharma.

In conclusion, the essential thing that comes before us from this text is that there is an abundance of desire, queries asked and expressed by Draupadi. As the prophecy suggested at the beginning of the novel, she is definitely responsible for changing the course of history. It is she who convinces Bheema to kill Keechaka; it is she again who takes a revengeful oath in the Kaurava Sabha on her being stripped. In this context of creating, forming identities, Divakaruni also falls prey to the dominant female subject of the epic. Other women such as Dhaima, Kunti, Hidimba, Sulochana, Subhadra, Uttara do not have so much to express. So, their identity gets assigned by our very own Draupadi: if Draupadi's voice gets suppressed in most of the versions of this epic, where only men and war predominate, the same happens to these women in this novel.

As far as Draupadi's own powerful voice is concerned, it is not just powerfully expressed and initiated but also her silent wishes, secret desires even though they never materialised, come out distinctly before the reader. She is more like a catalyst in the epic. She questions the society from a feminist angle, but her questions are yet to be answered. Moreover, like Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", it is she alone, being a representative of every woman, who ought to find answers to them. In the current terminology, she is a symbol of a true *atmanirbhar* woman.

We as readers may not agree with all of Divakaruni's or Mahasweta Devi's conclusions—for example, the Karna theme in *The Palace of Illusions*, where we also find him reciprocating the same admiration for her, and he goes on to admit:

When Kunti told me that if I joined her sons, I'd be king instead of Yuddhisthira, I wasn't tempted. But when she used her final weapon, when she said that as her son, I too would become Panchaali's husband- I was ready to give up my reputation, my honour, everything! I had to use all my willpower to remain silent! (Divakaruni 276-277)

This might seem far-fetched—but the great manly heroes of the epic are no longer the perfect supermen of the popular retelling. Right from Yuddhistira's dharma, to Kunti's honesty, to Bheeshma's loyalty, to Krishna's war policies, to Kshatriya code of war, all of them are questioned. During the battle of Kurukshetra when Drona plots to defeat Pandavas by luring them to engage

themselves in a challenge, Divakaruni explains, even though he realised that things were unfair, Arjun did not turn down the challenge: such was the Kshatriya code.

These perspectives also serve as filling in the gaps. There are several versions of Mahabharata—such as by C. Rajagopalachari, Devdutt Patnaik, or Kamala Subramaniam among others—in all of them we come across innumerable mini-stories and episodes which are missing in the other versions. The beauty of this epic lies in digging those tales and then understanding the larger text. All such narratives must be heard, read, and celebrated, for they are crucial in understanding the real dynamics of the relationships of the characters with each other.

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