

# Women Writing Women: Recontextualizing Women of the Epics in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Historical Fiction

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## Abstract

*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the two great epics, are written by Maharishi Ved Vyas and Maharishi Valmiki respectively while also being rewritten and narrated by men over several years. These epics narrated heroic as well as mystical tales of the great warriors, the protectors of the *dharma*, the moral men who changed the course of history. However, these epics also had women characters that played a pivotal role during the course of action in these epics. Soorpanakha for instance incites Ravana's desire to woo and later abduct Sita and challenge Rama in *Ramayana* while Draupadi was held responsible for the greatest battle of Kurukshetra in *Mahabharata*. The epics written by men only speak of these women in the Aristotelian sense where the heroine is responsible for bringing destruction and massacre in the course of time. The paper, however, proposes to read the history against the mainstream narrative where the women actually are the protectors of *dharma*. The paper argues how the recent re-writings and adaptations have reignited the voices, fears, turmoil, secret desires, anxieties, rage, displeasure, and right to an agency to the women characters of these epics who have long been neglected and hegemonically underdeveloped by the male authors. The paper takes into account the recent renditions of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *Forest of Enchantments* (2019) in the discourse of historical fiction.

**Keywords:** Mainstream narrative, historical fiction, real accounts, identity.

Chitra Banerjee attempts to rewrite history by placing the women in the center of the text thereby turning the narrative to disclose the history against the grain. The texts under analysis come under the genre of historical fiction “because historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable” (147 White). Divakaruni’s story of Mahabharata and Ramayana is not just centered on nobles, statesmen, and the politics of the state but rather tries to unfold the stories that pass from one woman to another inside the palaces. Aparna Basu in her essay “Women’s History in India: A Historiographical Survey” builds on the visibility of “women as producers, peasants, workers, artisans, domestic servants, in their roles in the family, as wives, daughters, and mothers have to become visible. The totality of women’s lives is the concern of women historians” (181-182). The author clearly understands the necessity to give voice to the inner feelings of Draupadi as well as Sita while simultaneously questioning their appropriated identities.

Divakaruni builds on Elaine Showalter’s theory of ‘gynocriticism’ a peculiar term for a new type, the feminist criticism where women are writers of histories, the language which belongs to women, and the themes which are crucial for women. The paper argues about the current position of women in historiographical fiction. The concept of *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism. Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusion* and *The Forest of Enchantment* has weaved the ‘unimportant’ stories of women and framed them as a mainstream discourse of history. *The Palace of Illusion* brings into consideration the story and agonies of Kunti, mother of the Pandavas who gives her firstborn son away to save her reputation in the royal family and thrives for him for the rest of her life. The self-sacrifice of Gandhari, wife of the blind king Dhritarashtra, who chooses to blindfold herself as she has no right to appreciate the joys of life which her husband is bereft of. The

disgrace and humiliation of Amba who returns as Shikhandi to take her revenge and most importantly of Panchali/Draupadi who turns the events of history and becomes a pawn to establish *dharmā* while continuously challenging the patriarchal structures of hegemony. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) also gives a voice to the women in Ramayana. The opening of the novel itself creates alterity where Sita reads Valmiki's Ramayana and finds herself completely absent in it. She questions Valmiki's words where he has sung praises of Ram's valor but has totally forgotten about what happened to Sita. In response, she starts writing 'the Sitayan'. She chooses the color red to write it because, "How else could I write my story except in the color of menstruation and childbirth, the color of the marriage mark that changes women's lives, the color of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity in the palace of the demon king?" (Divakaruni 4). Apart from Sita, we also see other women – Queen Sunaina who mothered the earthborn Sita and secretly advises Janak about all the important matters of the state, Urmila- the forgotten sister and wife, who for no reason spent fourteen years without her husband, Ahalya- whose beauty was turned into stone by a husband's jealous fury, Kaikeyi- who received nothing but hate from everyone for loving her son unconditionally, Soorpanakha-wild enchantress of the forest whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man and Mandodri- wife of Ravana who was forced to watch her kingdom turn to ruins and death of her son only because her husband was obsessed with another woman. All these women are mostly absent or misrepresented in the Men's writings "It is quite otherwise with the writer of realistic fiction, who sets her story within a time-and-place-specific context and examines, through the employment of her imaginary characters' actions, the line that divides the real of that time and place from what historians would recognize as the truths we know about it" (White 148). The author gives the voice to Panchali and Sita contrasting to the epic where she is they are subaltern, subdued, and appropriated in the name of *Stri Dharma*. The author here has taken into consideration the women's cultural body, their oral folktales, and gossiping as text and developed on the view that "for new historicism, history cannot exercise that stabilizing and silencing function it possessed

in analyses that sought to declare the limits of the sayable and thinkable... against the determinism that accepts to insist that certain things in a given period were beyond conception or articulation” (Gallagher & Greenblat 17).

In *The Palace of Illusion*, Divakaruni creates and invokes a new character to puncture the mainstream history in the name of Dhai ma who becomes a harbinger of the different kinds of stories about every other character in the Draupadi’s life thus becoming a perpetual voice who expresses her deepest desires, however, constantly reminding herself and the queen about their gender and the associated roles. Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, she creates the Haradhanu- the mystic bow that becomes the storyteller for Sita and develops a cordial relationship with her. It leads Sita to places she has never dreamt of and tells her secrets about her mystical birth and the future. The inquisitive and unqueenly deminer of Draupadi and Sita acts like another part of the mainstream history which is anecdotal in its essence, “incompletely digested by the larger narrative, and divulges a different reality” (51). Draupadi questions her existence and feels herself as “a girl who wasn’t invited” while Sita is curious to know about her real parents. Sita is a healer and a warrior who resonates herself with nature as “because like them, I was earth-born” ( Divakaruni 7) and often wonders where has she come from. Draupadi’s questioning of her name had a link to the male authoritarian figure. Whilst she has the most unusual birth, she belongs to the father and doesn’t possess the individual identity and motive in her life. Draupadi questions “my attention veered to the meaning of names our father chose. Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies, Draupadi, Daughter of Draupad ‘’ (Divakaruni 5). Divakaruni’s Draupadi on the contrary emerges as the cause of the destruction of the enemies. She blames her father to choose a name that would appropriate and undermine her role in history and conceals her individuality. She expresses her anguish at her lessons about ‘restrictive laws’ as opposed to Dhri’s lessons about warfare and justice. Her audacity to intervene in the lessons meant for men displeases the brahmin Patriarch and also her father. Draupadi claims she was better at “composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks and writing poetry”

but was not prepared for the magnanimous destiny that she is attracting. (Divakaruni 29). It is the male who defines and outlines women's spheres and rights. On the contrary, Draupadi often imagines her own palace which materializes the question of space to which women belong to. Is it her father's palace or the Palace of Hastinapur which belongs completely to her? The palace that Pandavas built is a mere illusion as Draupadi doesn't feel the belongingness there either. Similarly, Sita has a longing for forests and oceans. She doesn't feel a sense of belongingness in her father's home.

Draupadi vehemently wants to listen to the story of her birth from Dhari Ma frequently which makes her an important part of history and the future while Sita wants the same from Haradhanu. Both of them want to assert their identity and embed it into the very present life they are leading. The phenomenon which the mainstream history or historical fiction writers often ignore is the subtle yet relevant stories that the womenfolk have to offer as a cultural text. Divakaruni's feminist style of writing weaves the novel with the threads of the tales of women's imagination. The utopian possibility of French feminist Criticism has been made possible by the author's imagination and how she creates a sensibility of difference in women's language and text. The introduction of Maharishi Ved Vyasa as someone who is a seer and whom women love to visit is intrinsically an attribute of the feminine style of writing. The qualities of eavesdropping and collecting various gossip around the palace make Draupadi and Sita embrace femininity and its qualities with grace. Divakaruni's Draupadi and Sita also problematize the hypocrite male righteousness and Dharma through the story of Amba and Ahalya respectively. They claim themselves to be the protector of dharma while playing with the honor of women. Shikhandi comments and teaches Draupadi a lesson- "little sister: wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever". The statement also acts as an omen from heaven, produced by the reading process, as some textual critics would maintain.

Spacks calls the "difference of women's writing a "delicate divergency," testifying to the subtle and elusive nature of the feminine practice of writing. Yet the delicate divergency of the

woman's text challenges us to respond with equal delicacy and precision to the small but crucial deviations, the cumulative weightings of experience and exclusion, that have marked the history of women's writing" (186). The secret desire that Draupadi nurtures about Karna even after being married is the point that punctures the teleological narrative of the Draupadi of the epic *Mahabharata*. Similarly, Sita shares a complex and mystical relationship with Ravana before marrying Ram. She had visions and dreams where she had felt a strong connection with Ravana, just as she feels with Ram when she meets him for the first time. The author consciously builds on the relationship of Kunti and Draupadi as typically Indian in essence where they both share the feeling of competitiveness and jealousy. Similarly, Sita and Kakeyi share a space that has competitiveness and jealousy in it. Kakeyi is jealous that Sita has repaired Dashrath's relationship with Ram's mother Kaushalya, is a healer, and is proficient in weaponry. She even challenges her for a duel which she loses. Kaushalya's maid Manthara further fuels this jealousy. Draupadi is conscious about her power status and Pandavas affection towards her because she allowed them to follow their dharma by obeying the words of their mother. She thinks about Kunti and says "a woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away" (Divakaruni 108). She blames Kunti for her decision to marry all the Pandavas as the potential and conscious destroyer of the bond that Arjuna and Draupadi would have formed after the marriage. Sita, on the other hand, is concerned about herself as she witnesses the relationship between Ram and Laxman. She says, "Did he even need someone else to love, when Lakshman and he seemed like one soul in two bodies?" (Divakaruni 39). She is also concerned about her sister Urmila for she is doubtful whether Laxman would be a good husband or not as he is so devoted towards Ram.

In Lerner's words "It is important to understand that "woman's culture" is not and should not be seen as a subculture. It is hardly possible for the majority to live in a subculture.... Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they

transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its "superiority") and redefine it. Thus, women live in duality-as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture" (52). In both the novels there are instances of gossip, eavesdropping, getting dressed for an event, etc. All of these are part of 'Woman's Culture' but they are ignored in men's writings and somehow treated as 'subculture'. When Women write history, these 'subcultures' play an important role in the course of events and are integral to their voice.

Another commonality in both novels is the politics of pleasing the husband's family, especially his parents to get his love. Draupadi shows her prowess over the Pandavas by telling them time and again that she married all of them because their mother Kunti wanted so. Similarly, Sita puts efforts to repair Dashrath's and Kaushalya's relationship so that she can earn Ram's admiration. When Ram and Sita are ready to return to Lanka after the war, Sita is the only one who can ride Pushpakvimaan. When she successfully does so, Ram looks at her to which she says,

'When Ram saw what had transpired, he looked at me newly, with a different, considering gaze. Even as I basked in his admiration, I realized that until now, he had appreciated me only for qualities that he thought of as womanly: beauty, kindness, the skills to heal plants and animals and humans—and even rakshasas. The power to make him fall in love with me. He admired the fact that I'd repaired the relationship between Kaushalya and King Dasharath, bringing them closer. He was impressed because I created a beautiful home for us in the harsh wilderness. But he considered them all to be domestic skills. Now, for the first time, he looked at me with respect, the way one might gaze at an equal. It made me glow with satisfaction.' ( Divakaruni 256)

To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has represented the inner sphere of women's life and successfully brought them back from the hegemonic representation in the epic. When women write women, they portray women being the actual protectors of

Dharma. Unlike Men's writings where war and weaponry hold a higher place, women's writings focus more on the inner sphere of a woman's life, which is different from her public life. Both Sita and Draupadi were queens and goddesses in their public sphere but Chitra Bannerjee has put forward their inner battles and their identity which they had to sacrifice to protect their Dharma. Contrary to the epics, both novels show post-war effects where Draupadi and Sita take charge and put things back to normal by doing things like selling their jewelry to raise money, sympathizing with the women who lost their soldier husbands in the war, etc.

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