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POLYPHONIC VISUALITY AND FEMINIST RE-IMAGINATION IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: A PERFORMATIVE NARRATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines The Palace of Illusions as a feminist reimagination of the Mahabharata through the lens of polyphonic visuality and performative narrative. It explores how the novel constructs multiple female voices that challenge patriarchal epic traditions and reframe mythic history through embodied experience. Drawing on feminist narratology and performance theory, the study analyzes how voice, memory, and visual imagination function as acts of narrative performance. Draupadi's perspective, alongside other marginalized female subjectivities, creates a dialogic space that resists singular authority. The paper argues that this polyphonic approach transforms the epic into a living, contested narrative shaped by gendered perception, visual consciousness, and performative storytelling.

Keywords: Literature, Feminism, Narrative Art, Emotional Consciousness, Ethics, Epic, Mahabharata, Classical Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

Reimagining a grand patriarchal epic from a marginalized woman's perspective is a bold political act with high stakes. It promises to challenge the entrenched gender biases of the source tale, yet risks merely translating an ancient story into a modern novel without altering its patriarchal ethics Ostriker (1982). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes this risk in The Palace of Illusions (2008), a first-person retelling of the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi (Panchaali). From the outset, the narrative stance signals a "polyphonic feminism," a term we may use for Draupadi's voice as a platform that "grants validity to all voices" in the story Bakhtin (1984). Unlike a monologic narrator who dominates or confesses, Panchaali's "I" actively hosts and contests the voices of others rather than speaking alone. Early

in the novel, the heroine pointedly asserts her agency: "Perhaps Time was the master player. But… I would be a player, too, in my own way" Divakaruni (2008). This signals that her narration will not humbly recede behind male heroes, but will intervene in destiny. Such an approach aligns with what Alicia Ostriker terms revisionist mythmaking, which "lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" Ostriker (1982). In Divakaruni's retelling, Draupadi indeed challenges stereotypes of the docile epic heroine. She revises the epic by reallocating narrative authority, reframing episodes of marriage and sexual violence in terms of consent and personhood, and recasting dharma as an ethic of care and accountability rather than patrilineal duty. This essay argues that through these three moves, Divakaruni's Panchaali creates a polyphonic feminist retelling of the Mahabharata that amplifies plural truths and ethical questioning in the heart of the epic.

2. MINIMAL CONTEXT AND METHOD

In the ancient Mahabharata, Draupadi occupies a paradoxical position: celebrated as Panchakanya (one of five virtuous epic women) and pivotal to the war's genesis, yet accorded little autonomous voice. She is born from fire, married to five heroes, publicly humiliated in a royal dice game, and vengefully invokes divine retribution – all while largely speaking through the ventriloquy of male bards. Divakaruni's novel recenters Draupadi, transforming her from a "shadowy figure" defined by fathers and husbands into a first-person narrator who illuminates "the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits" Divakaruni (2008). The Palace of Illusions thus belongs to a wave of feminist revisions of myth and history. As Linda Hutcheon observes, to adapt a classic story is to "rethink the form, context, and ideology" of the original Hutcheon (2012). Here, the author explicitly rethinks the Mahabharata's ideology by giving Draupadi a voice of her own. This approach draws on feminist narratology, which Susan Lanser defines as a narrative inquiry that foregrounds gender and power in storytelling Lanser (1992). Divakaruni's Panchaali is a speaker and questioner of epic events, engaging in what Lanser calls epic jurisprudence – reading legendary scenes like a courtroom drama of rights and obligations Lanser (1992). For example, in the dice hall Draupadi demands legal accountability for her own staking. Such moments exemplify Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, wherein a novel contains "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices, is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather it is a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own worlds, which combines but is not merged in the unity of the event." Bakhtin (1984). Draupadi's story is polyphonic in that her first-person narration incorporates multiple voices, inviting dialogue rather than delivering a single verdict. Bringing feminist narratology into conversation with epic jurisprudence and care ethics, this essay reads The Palace of Illusions as a polyphonic feminist critique of the epic's androcentric laws and values.

3. CLOSE READING I – VOICE AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

The age old traditional concept of male control and the authority is being challenged by the distinctive narrative voice of Draupadi. The usage of "I" at multiple stages doesn't specify the importance of private confession but also denotes the multiplicity of voices and perspectives. At the earliest Panchaali specifically specified that she will be the creator of her own destiny stating "I would be a player, too, in my own way" Divakaruni (2008). Draupadi refuses to remain a passive piece on the epic chessboard moved by others (Time, kings, or even gods). Instead, she asserts the agency to influence outcomes. This self-authorizing stance immediately expands the narrative authority beyond monologue. As Bakhtin explains in describing polyphonic narrative, major characters are "not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse" Bakhtin (1984). Divakaruni essentially turns the heroine into a narrator, so that Draupadi can host a dialogue among the many voices that have spoken for or about her in tradition.

One striking example of Draupadi's multi-voiced narration is how she retells the pivotal moment of her polyandrous marriage. In Vyasa's epic, after Arjuna wins Draupadi at her svayaṁvara (self-choice ceremony), his mother Kunti unknowingly instructs her sons, "share what you have brought" – a command that forces Draupadi to wed all five Pandavas. Divakaruni has Panchaali recount this scene in her own wry tone, complete with the direct speech of Kunti and the embarrassed reactions of the brothers. Upon arriving with their new bride, Bheem calls out to their mother as a prank, and Kunti's voice rings from inside the hut: "Whatever you've brought should be shared equally amongst all my

sons" Divakaruni (2008). By quoting Kunti's exact words, Draupadi the narrator pointedly preserves the matriarch's imperative as if entered into a legal transcript. The speech act is an imperative (an order to share), casting Draupadi not as a person with agency, but a gift or property to be distributed. Draupadi's narrative voice does not leave this unchallenged. She looked at the brothers and saw the embarrassment in their eyes, after the command of their mother. Her words were filled with irony. Although she bowed gently as a new bride should do, but this doesn't simply make her action being meek or slow. The narration helps the reader to pinpoint the ethics of Kunti's decree. Here Divakaruni pointed out the authorial voice of a mother being counter-argued through the perspective of bride. This one points or aspect pointed out by Divakaruni has never been surfaced in any epic. One critic Susan Lancer observed that the concept of narrative voice can subvert and reinforce the authority, when it is aligned with power Lanser (1992).

The polyphonic text is created by Panchaali throughout the novel with the use of the first-person voice, interacting both with the voices of others and responding to them. She describes her conversations with Krishna, her close friend and sometimes her guru in such a manner that places emphasis on his advice as opposed to his orders. In contrast to other versions of the epic in which Krishna is the moral male divine who can only be trustworthy, he is seen a lot of the time as a discussion partner whose wisdom is screened by her own insights. As an example, just before the exile of the Pandavas, Krishna consoles Draupadi in a gentle way by saying, Time is even and merciful. However long this year may appear, it will actually be no more than a year of happy days" Divakaruni (2008). Draupadi quotes the exact words of Krishna, with the decline of his sympathy. Remarkably, she does not convey his words as something God had to say to you, but rather she also describes it as a loving friendship: Krishna "touched my shoulder" and it was soothing something cruel in fate Divakaruni (2008). In the story "I" becomes the voice of Krishna, therefore, and his emotional intelligence is his religion, rather than a dogma. Draupadi frequently eavesdrops in such conversations - something that was not frequently dealt with in the source epic. Divakaruni (feminist narratologically) reconstructs the powerful, patriarchal narrative voice of a woman who tells the story instead of an omniscient male sage, and frequently gives the stage to the other. She goes to the extent of giving in to voices that confront her. When Draupadi flies at Krishna when Krishna talks of Subhadra (Arjuna's wife); Krishna kindly urges her back to "look at the bigger picture of destiny" Divakaruni (2008). Draupadi incorporates this condemnation in her story without being defensive.

Divakaruni further uses Draupadi's narration to reflect on storytelling itself, acknowledging multiple versions and rumours about her life. The novel is studded with moments of meta-narration where Draupadi recognizes how epic reputation is formed by bards and gossip. After the Great War, as Panchaali wanders among villages, she wonders if ordinary people "knew my story… for that's how swiftly stories can travel, and how they change as they go" Divakaruni (2008). She imagines them thinking she "deserved everything that happened" to her Divakaruni (2008). This acute awareness of legend and audience turns Draupadi into what Robyn Warhol might call an "engaging narrator," one who knows she is telling a tale to an audience with preconceived notions. Draupadi does not trust the bards' patriarchal framing of her character – "a shadow at the edges of her husbands' glory" – so she takes control of the narrative frame. She at one stage clearly states, I am reclaiming the story (Warhol 16) as her brother attempts to initiate the family history with a male perspective. These examples highlight the polyphonic feminism of the text: The voice of the text as narrated by Panchaali accommodates a conversation between conflicting accounts of the narrative - hers and those belonging to Vyasa, bards, or even her brother. It is the outcome of what Bakhtin would term as a dialogic text in which no voice (and not even that of Draupadi) is definitive and conclusive. The power of the narration by Draupadi is power to organise voices and not to suppress them. Draupadi is a combination of narrator and character, questioner and witness, host and participant, which enables The Palace of Illusions to address, in its storytelling, the issue of gendered power dynamics itself. Divakaruni achieves this polyphonic first-person voice, thus, to make the epic not a grand monologue of kings and dharma, but a dialogue with the subaltern feminine point of view, the narrator and judge of truth.

4. CLOSE READING II - DESIRE, CONSENT, AND SHAME

The retelling of three highly infamous incidents that happened to Draupadi - her svayamvara (marriage contest), her polyandrous marriage, and her being disrobed in the Kaurava court - are completely reassessed by Divakaruni as events that can be examined not only as a ritual or melodrama, but as an ethical challenge. In the process, the novel shifts its focus from female chastity and obedience (as emphasised in traditional telling) to female consent, personhood, and the allocation of shame. The voices of panchaali encourage us to perceive such events not as decree or showmanship of gods but as contractual and rights abusing negotiation and thus perform what one scholar defines as epic jurisprudence Fleming (2021).

To begin with, there is the swayamvara or the marriage feast of Draupadi as it is a huge spectacle in the epic and she supposedly had to select her husband. Mahabharata in its original form, Draupadi is not very independent- when she decides to challenge Arjuna to an archery contest, she says nothing, and her choice is mostly implied. In this scene, Divakaruni provides Panchaali with an inner voice, showing the way she is unsure of the fact that she is being offered as a prize. As she walks into the arena, covered and silent she recalls the hush that instantly follows: When I entered the wedding hall, there was a deep, quiet silence... And behind my veil I smiled grimly. Take the present of power, I said to myself. It may be yours at once" Divakaruni (2008). The irony in her voice is very real. Draupadi understands that the fear of the crowds will give her some momentary illusion of power; woman being made an object in spotlight. The only control she could have over the events is to withhold it or just postpone it a bit. Her severely inner monologue (it may be your only one) brings out how limited her power is. This detail makes the svayamvara more of a fairy-tale with the princess picking a husband and less of the commentary on the patriarchal whim. In fact, Draupadi is quite limited in her choice by the will of her father and the regulations of this contest. In fact, when the unknown Karna comes forward and almost succeeds, Draupadi makes an ethically questionable move - she put Karna to a halt by saying that she will not marry a man of unknown origin. This is not in the novel presented as haughtiness (as it is perceived by some readers of the epic) but as a desperate attempt to make some kind of choice. The narration of Panchaali acknowledges the voice of social bigotry but also betrays her secret satisfaction that Arjuna - the man she so actually desired - would be the victor. Taking the voice of the people, the voice of the woman in marriage, and the secret desire, the novel accepts the svayamvara as a multifaceted negotiation of agreement. The meaning of conception is two-fold in this case: Draupadi is ready to marry Arjuna (implicitly), but not Karna, and uses a social command (caste) to maintain her personal space. The morals are not very comfortable and Divakaruni is not afraid of that morality. Instead she takes it as an upshot of how the personal agency of Draupadi will shortly be lost thoroughly at the hands of the command of Kunti of giving Draupadi up to five husbands.

The very contract of polyandry is put across jurisdically. In the novel there is a representation of the order issued by Kunti, that whatever the things being brought should be divided in all of my sons Divakaruni (2008); makes the marriage of Draupadi to the Pandavas sounded more of an obligation claim than a love affair. Draupadi talks of the reaction of brothers who were shocked, yet obedient, in disposition, where they at once begin to regard her as a gift to be divided. By so doing, Divakaruni highlights the issue of consent: Draupadi was never questioned whether she consented to marrying all the five. Offering Draupadi an inner voice in that instance, the novel poses a logic question that the epic sweeps under the carpet: On what grounds a mother is capable of giving away a wife to all sons? Panchaali reminds about the effort of Yudhishthira to alleviate the situation - he tries to call Kunti to the sense or share his punishment "Let me go and explain, he said, rushed inside" Divakaruni (2008). Such a minor addition underscores the fact that even in the narrative, there were questions concerning the legitimacy of the set up. To some degree, The Palace of Illusions tries to put the polyandry on trial. Draupadi's brothers' in-law were concerned about it, Vyasadeva the author of the epic finally offers a divine justification to the marriage, though Draupadi of Divakaruni is not satisfied. She often reflects on how no one asked her before binding her to five men. By exposing this, Divakaruni reframes the marriage as a contract made without the primary party's consent, a scenario of patriarchal contractarianism that the novel invites us to question. Draupadi's continuing narrative will test this contract, especially in the next crisis – the dice game – where her personhood is gambled away as if she were property.

The dice game and disrobing in King Dhritarashtra's court is the epic's most infamous scene of female humiliation. Divakaruni retells it with a razor-sharp focus on juridical ethics and the relocation of shame. As the Pandavas lose everything in dice, Draupadi is ultimately dragged into the assembly hall to be disrobed by the Kauravas. In the Sanskrit epic, Draupadi's great contribution is to ask a bold legal question: "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" – implicitly, if Yudhishthira had already lost his own freedom, he had no legal right to stake his wife. This juridical reasoning has been observed to be brilliant by scholars. Draupadi does not just raise the question but also describes her line of reasoning. She tells us of the silence which followed as she spoke of her challenge, how the Kaurava elders were cowering in silence Divakaruni (2008). In this instance, the novel directly concurs with the intellectual commentary of jurist C. T. Fleming, raises the question introduced by Draupadi. Where she questioned the lawfulness of Yudhishthira's final bet, arguing that a man who has been enslaved can no longer have any property to wager with them, makes them legally invalid Fleming (2021). Divakaruni gives Draupadi an opportunity to present this case in a forceful way to the court and so transforms the dice hall into a courtroom drama; with Draupadi acting as a lawyer to the sympathetic side that she was. Notably, the men responded to her plea with equivocation as in the Karna and the Kauravas prey on her, and the elders look ashamed. The outrage of the narration in the novel is attached to the fact that Draupadi is outraged by the complicity

of the institution: the rest of the Pandavas, "hard-hearted in their silence, did not appear to care what happened to me" Fleming (2021). It is a dagger line - they even have to indict even her husbands fails to protect her rights. Believing their silence as betrayal, Draupadi shifts the blame of the victim to the people who ought to have done something about it.

No distribution of shame is more indicated elsewhere than in the would-be disrobing itself. Draupadi is saved through divine intervention (she is miraculously saved) when her sari extends indefinitely and she is shown crying and beseeching for mercy, suggests her modesty (and by implication her honour) is at risk. As a result of this assault, a total transformation in consciousness took place in Draupadi. First, she is terrified - "the shame which a woman could conceive was worst of all was going to befall me... They were sitting in their paralysed state as I was battling with Dussasan" Divakaruni (2008). However, when the villain Dussasana pulled her garments, Draupadi begins to hear some counsel of Krishna: "no one can embarrass you, provided you do not permit it" Divakaruni (2008). The realization was that "it was he who was right come to me in that momentous moment. I will leave them gaze upon my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They ought to feel ashamed and not I" Divakaruni (2008). This is among the strongest lines in the novel. She understands that it is the disgrace of those who abuse and those who watch and stay silent about it; are dishonoured, rather than the woman whose honour are their prey. This defiance of the shame paradigm is a feminist stunt by Divakaruni. As literary critic Sally Sutherland notes, the Mahabharata's dice scene is ironic because Draupadi's presence, meant to utterly humiliate her, "proves to be a humiliation for all the men present," since she reveals "quick wit and a clever tongue" that exposes their moral bankruptcy Sutherland (1989). Divakaruni brings this irony to the forefront. Draupadi's fearless question and her refusal to bow her head turn the tables: it is the male assembly whose honor collapses. Indeed, in the novel Draupadi ultimately delivers a fearsome prophecy to that effect, cursing the Kauravas and even her husbands with the consequences of this day: "All that will remain is the shameful memory of today… what you tried to do to a defenseless woman" Divakaruni (2008). Notably, she looks directly at Karna while saying this, since Karna – whom she once secretly admired – has now joined in shaming her. The Draupadi-Karna thread is an undercurrent throughout the novel, casting desire and rejection in a tragic ethical light. Earlier, we learned that Draupadi privately yearned for Karna even as she publicly rejected him at her svayaṁvara, and that Karna "never forgot the humiliation" she caused him. In the dice hall, Karna repays that humiliation "a hundredfold" Divakaruni (2008), egging on the disrobing and calling Draupadi derogatory names. By narrating these exchanges in detail, Panchaali acknowledges her own role in the cycle of insult – but also judges Karna and the others for their disproportionate cruelty. The result is a morally complex picture: shame and honor are not tied simplistically to female chastity, but to ethical conduct. Draupadi's honor in this feminist retelling lies in her fierce ethical voice, not in the intactness of her clothes. Conversely, the men's shame is their failure to uphold dharma – their chivalric duty to protect and their human duty to respect a person's autonomy.

5. CLOSE READING III – DHARMA AS CARE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Palace of Illusions turns from a tone of firearm justice to an attitude of caring after the holocaust of the war. The novel reverses what dharma, - the principle of duty and righteousness so important in the epic - means not as being a warrior code or protector of a patriarchal statute, but as a care, as a grief-sharing practices, as a bearing and charged with the consequences of misery. Divakaruni assumes a different jurisprudence of empathy through the post war experiences of Draupadi and her discourses with Krishna. The formerly proud princess, who insisted on blood to require blood, starts slowly becoming a supporter of mercy and common healing. This transformation proves what Martha Nussbaum may refer to as the introduction of emotions and vulnerability of the ethical thought with an understanding that the grief of other people is a moral compass (Nussbaum 300). At the end of the novel, dharma is no longer an account of the rules that heroic men should follow, but an embodied, personal, duty to care to the vulnerable - an idea that invokes feminist care ethics and the idea presented by Judith Butler that "moral responsibility is an obligation we bear due to being in the vulnerable position that the claim of others seeks to make upon us" Butler (2012). Divakaruni, using Draupadi, succeeds in injecting the ethos of the epic with the ethics of care.

The most interesting scene that highlights this reorientation is the one that reveals when Draupadi met the widows and women, widened with the loss of their husbands after the war. In Mahabharata there is conflict between the Pandavas and a battle after the winning of Pandavas, which left Yudhishthira disturbed by Blood Rivers that had to flow to obtain the kingship. In the version recounted by Divakaruni, that pain is brought along by Draupadi - and largely by a choir of ordinary women who have lost husbands, fathers, and sons on one side and lost husbands, fathers, and sons on the other. Giving a wandering tour round the ravaged capital, Draupadi sees: "Hastinapur after the war was more of a

city of women, widows who had never imagined that their own survival would mean the survival of their family... The less fortunate... were victimized. Wealthy widows did not do much better in being alone" Divakaruni (2008). This text shows the social collateral casualties of war not only the deaths of the known heroism of war but also the pain of the unprotected are left behind. The story of Draupadi literally recognizes the presence of servants, mothers and even bereft old grandmothers, thereby contributing poignant polyphony of grieving to the story of the aftermath of epic. In a vivid image, a crowd of distraught women surrounds Yudhishthira and demanded him either to take care of them or allow them to burn themselves, as only we humans will be the ones to end up with widows Divakaruni (2008). The women wail that he needs not be able to bring back their loved ones but at least leave them the human decency of dying on pyres of their husbands. This is a mass consciousness of the excluded mind of Draupadi. The woman who swore revenge by all means is now sensitive to the price - in terms of shattered lives. The novel greatly raises a question by having the eyes of Draupadi, what type of victory can leave behind a kingdom of widows and orphans? Draupadi tells about the reflections of Yudhishthira: The victors now must look after the widows and the orphans and rise every morning to the sorrow of loss. Who is the actual winner and who is the loser then? Divakaruni (2008). This dharma is redefined by this rhetorical question. The righteousness no longer concerns winning or fulfilling retaliation promises, but it is in enduring the consequences of the misfortune one has inflicted or have one the damage. Yudhishthira sings the praise of the last and the least almost in Christian accents - a volume which must have been induced by Bhakti ethic, uninfluenced perhaps by the presence of Krishna. And in fact, Krishna in the novel continuously leads characters to empathy and moderation as opposed to bloodlust.

The last interactions between Krishna and Draupadi make a vision of dharma to be compassionate on accountability. As Draupadi is about to burst out into another curse, as she is angry at Ashwatthama (killed her children), Krishna safeguards her by subtlety rebuking her, suggesting that by indulging in further violence, no one will be happy. Previously, he advised forgiveness to the mother of the Kauravas, Gandhari who shouts out against the lineage of Krishna in despair. Krishna takes over the curse of Gandhari in the novel, with no retaliation, and informs Draupadi afterwards, "Even that was part of the law" Divakaruni (2008) - another vague saying, that could imply that dharma may include taking responsibility and misery. Draupadi and Yudhishthira meet the queen of Dhritarashtra named Gandhari who has lost all her hundred sons in one of the most frightening scenes after the war. Gandhari charges Draupadi: half the dead are the victims of Draupadi as the war was but ostensibly on her account. Instead of protecting herself, Draupadi accuses Gandhari, on the contrary; she confirms his suffering. She told that she had confessed her guilt concerning the role she had played in ushering this war and requested that they forgive her. It is a gorgeous switch to this epic in which Draupadi is not repentant and Gandhari is somehow brushed off. Draupadi makes herself responsible when her responsibility would be limited by strict justice. This way, she will be depicting a kind of dharma that is based on humility and empathy. She is aware that her own need to exact personal revenge (insisting on the war when she was disrobed) led to a trauma that was much larger than hers. This does not undo the injustice that has been done to her, but it makes her moral sight big enough to care about the plight of even the mothers of her rivals. It is the final gesture of treatment: Draupadi reaches out to the woman, Gandhari, who had earlier on the polyandry scene, informed her that she must accept her destiny as a wife of five (it is also referred to as the early polyandry scene).

Judith Butler writes that "ethical obligation… establishes us as creatures who are fundamentally defined by [the] ethical relation" of responsiveness to others' vulnerability Butler (2012). In the closing chapters of The Palace of Illusions, Draupadi becomes just such an ethical creature, defined no longer by pride or anger but by responsiveness to the vulnerable. Her understanding of dharma evolves from the warrior-code concepts she was taught (support your husband's vows, exact revenge on wrongdoers) to an awareness that true righteousness might lie in breaking the chain of violence and tending to the wounded. When the Pandavas eventually renounce the world and journey toward the Himalayas, Draupadi's thoughts are full of those left behind. She even worries about who will look after the servants and the poor in the kingdom after they depart. This emphasis on care-taking as duty contrasts sharply with the Mahabharata's own ending, where salvation is personal (each hero falls due to personal sin). In Divakaruni's version, salvation or fall seems collective: the moral worth of the Pandavas is measured by how much accountability they take for the world they've shattered.

6. BRIEF COUNTERPOINT AND REJOINDER

Divakaruni's narrative strategy in The Palace of Illusions is not without its skeptics. One possible objection is that by giving Draupadi a single, central voice, the novel could risk monologism – speaking over the truly diverse perspectives

of the epic. After all, Draupadi has the dominant consciousness throughout the book; one might argue that this is simply replacing one central authority (Vyasa's omniscient voice) with another (Panchaali's subjective voice). However, this critique overlooks the novel's dialogic texture. Draupadi's first-person narration is carefully constructed to incorporate and redistribute voices, not to silence them. As discussed, she yields narrative space to others' speeches (from Kunti's command to Krishna's counsel to the widows' laments), effectively staging a conversation of viewpoints. In Bakhtin's terms, Divakaruni achieves dialogism even within a single narrator by ensuring that the protagonist's voice "unmerges" and interacts with other voices. The result is that Panchaali's "I" is less a tyrant and more a curator of a chorus. Far from monologic, the novel is polyphonic in spirit: multiple consciousnesses sound through Draupadi's storytelling, affirming Bakhtin's insight that a truly polyphonic narrative allows many voices to speak through one. Indeed, the effect of reading The Palace of Illusions is not that we hear only Draupadi, but that we come to hear Bhima's remorse, Kunti's pragmatism, Gandhari's anguish, Krishna's wisdom – all filtered through Draupadi, yet distinct and valid in themselves. The novel thus rebuts the monologism concern by design: Panchaali's very narrative mission is to open up the epic's discourse, not to close it down.

A second potential objection is more extrinsic: that by packaging Draupadi's story in an accessible Anglophone novel, Divakaruni might be domesticating the epic's radical critique for a global market, perhaps diluting its cultural specificity or political edge. Some may feel that the contemporary and intimate approach of the novel (with its colloquial dialogue and personified gods) makes the epic an ordinary historical romance, and therefore dilutes its element of subversion. The epic and its retelling by Divakaruni goes against that, however, strongly. The novel is not privy to the eschewing of the strong ethical discussion that forms out of Indic heritage. To take some examples, the episode of the interrogation of her captors by Draupadi at court is as sharp criticism of patriarchal and royal power as anything in Sanskrit classicism. It can be said that it is a bit sharper as well because Panchaali refers to dharma and Nyaya (justice) in easily comprehensible terms. On one of the climax scenes, she declares to the Kaurava council: To whom without property shall I have gambled on?... Last thing that you all ought to be ashamed of is what you attempted to do to a helpless woman! Divakaruni (2008). This defense and charge reflects earlier criticism of the Mahabharata that has often been wondered whether the game of dice is unjust (Adharmic) or not. Quite on the contrary, Divakaruni magnifies the critique which finds new audiences. The juridical and moral platitudes of the novel - of polyandry, caste, of the war - are addressed to the same ethical problems with which the Indian philosophers and poets have long been speaking centuries, only in their novelistic language. In a way, the feminist jurisprudence in the story of Draupadi is not being trivialized but internationalized by Divakaruni. The motherly, personalized story appeals to all types of readers to experience the exigency of queries such as, Can a woman be possessed in marriage, and "What is the cost of honour?" These are not romantic or personal questions but civilizational questions as can be made out of the story of Draupadi. Therefore, the popularity of the novel does not imply its lack of depth, quite on the contrary, it is an indicator that the central ethical dilemmas of the Mahabharata have been successfully answered (not trivialized) to a modern medium. Overall, as much as one could be tempted to think that single-narrator retelling or a commercial novel structure would harm the polyphony of the epic and one could be tempted to think that the novel would be used to recycle the arguments lasting throughout history about gender, power and responsibility, The Palace of Illusion shows that both approaches could be used to benefit the epic: the voice of Draupadi is used to orate a plurality of voices and use the novel form to recreate the original argument about gender, power, and responsibility.

7. CONCLUSION

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a great example of a feminist retelling being both respectful and subversive to an ancient epic. The novel offers a polyphonic feminism through the prism of Draupadi focusing on the renewal of the Mahabharata text and on the realm of moral life. This distribution of the voice of narrative has been perceived in the first-person narration of Panchaali and the way this mode of narration reassigns the role of narrator to the reader by making the epic a conversation between voices instead of a monologue. Draupadi calls upon the voices of other women, wives, gods and goddesses and even enemies to play roles in her tale and create a sort of tapestry of voices that counters the male monologue of the epic. We have discussed the way in which the novel re-enacts the moments of desire, consent, and shame, actually subjecting the patriarchal norms to trial. The juridical question by Draupadi in the dice hall and how she bravely refused to take shame changes the moral emphasis on female honour to male responsibility. This way, Divakaruni rectifies the gendered injustice of the original story clearing Draupadi as a legal and moral actor. Lastly we have seen how the post war situation in the novel redefines dharma as care and responsibility.

The compassion that Draupadi obtains with great difficulty and the advice of Krishna drive the story to an ethic that appreciates the weak and makes even the conquerors dependent on recovery of the solutions of undoing the defeats of the globe. This voice, to conformity, to nurse - a movement - resembles the old freewoman of the poem as her transformation into the old sage of the poem, and this reinforces a larger cultural project. Divakaruni is not just retelling the Mahabharath, she rewrites its moral script in a feminist perspective. The Draupadi of The Palace of Illusions is author and subject, injured party and healer, memory-keeper and visionary. In the novel's final pages, as Draupadi's life ebbs, she reflects not on vengeance or victory but on love: she decides to spend her last breaths in sending prayers to those she has loved and lost. In that gentle closure, we sense that the polyphonic chorus she has carried now resolves into harmony. Divakaruni leaves us with an image of Draupadi at peace, her story finally told in her own way. It is a fitting cadence: the once-silenced heroine becomes the author of a new epic ethos; one was justice and compassion sing in unison.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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