



A DYSTOPIAN VISION IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSION- A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an author, poet, activist and professor. She is considered an Indian American writer. Divakaruni often focuses on the experience of South Asian immigrants and her works are largely set in India and the United States. The present paper deals with the reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's remarkable historical fiction- "The Palace of Illusion". A number of researches have been done on this work with a Feminist and Psychological approach. This research paper will attempt the analyzing the work with an alternative perspective which is a Dystopian vision. With answering these questions- How Divakaruni's work- 'The palace of Illusion' is re-imaging the protagonist's perspective in a dystopian society instead of retelling the Indian epic? How dystopian vision is an appropriate choice for analyzing the present work? The paper will also argue that Dystopia is not just bounded to science fiction although it can also be related to other genres of fiction.

KEYWORDS

Dystopia, Contemporary fiction, Cultural Studies, Myth, Translation studies, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

INTRODUCTION

An Asian American award-winning author and poet Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India on July 29, 1956. And honoured with the PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) from the University of California-Berkeley. Divakaruni is currently devoting herself as a Gene McDavid Professor of the creative writing program at the University of Houston, Texas. Her compositions have been published in multiple journals which are including historical fiction, magical realism, myth, realistic fiction and fantasy. In some of her works, the hybridization of the contemporary world and present Indian society has been portraying. The author also applauded for portraying the dilemma of South Asian immigrant women under the spotlight of American society and culture.

This paper deals with the see Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni remarkable work 'The palace of Illusion' in which the author's ambiguous attempt with half myth, half history, fantasy and wholly magical flavouring has been clearly shown. The novel traces the life of Princess Panchaali, wife of Pandavas(five brothers) and the narrator herself. The work begins with her unexpected birth (from the fire of havan). Divakaruni uses her best way to portray her central character -Panchaali as a strong and rebellious woman who always grapple to balance her positivity in every brutal situation of her life. she experienced the darker days as every role of a woman such as a daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, as a queen and also as an individual. Divakaruni's work has been depicting the sole threatening, painful events of the central character, who was humiliated and molested several times in the tale, abandoned by her father in her childhood, and had to marry five brothers because of her mother-in-law's misunderstanding and forsake of others. Her husband's male desire leads her to secret attraction to one of her husband's biggest enemy. she was ordered to exile as an incognito with her husbands for thirteen years. She sacrificed her life's pleasures to made the Hastinapur (the central city) safer for women.

This paper will show the struggles, identify discrimination, female perspective under patriarchy under male domination, humiliation faced by the central character which makes her surrounding environment unsafe and miserable to her. By events depicts in the works. Furthermore, the article also describes how a dystopian lens could be an appropriate choice to explore the selected work. In the end, the research paper will show how Divyakaruni's version of Mahabharata is different from the original ancient with a few changes.

DISCUSSION

The general definition of Dystopian from the Oxford English Dictionary is "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad possible". It is often treated as an antonym of utopia, a term that was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 or simply called anti-utopia. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill was inspired by More's writing idea of utopia. Thereafter, (dy'- 'bad' and 'utopia'- 'place') meaning 'bad place' in 1868. Lyman Sargent defined it as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived". H. Porter says "states that unlike utopian novels dystopian novels are centred in the agon or conflict to provide their message; the

agon provides the vehicle for the narrator to make his or her case against the society by showing how he or she functions with it"³. Gorman Beauchamp pinpoint the most important element of the agon "in which the rebellious protagonist confronts the apologist for the evil regime"⁴.

The birth of the protagonist is exceptional and magical as she arose from the fire (yajna- the fire sacrifice) rather than from a woman's womb, after the prayer of thirteen days, sticking with her twin brother. Soon after her birth, she came to know that her father king Dhrupad wants only her brother- Dhrishtadyumna, who was a prophesied to slay Drona (his father's enemy) she is forcefully given to his father by gods and the prophecy made at her birth. - "Behold, we give you this Girl, a gift beyond what you asked for [...] she will change the course of history" (Divyakaruni,2009,P.5). Even at the time of her birth, she feels indecisiveness by her father. She abhorrence living alone in her father's palace with her nurse whom she called 'Dhai Ma' as she didn't have any biological mother. She said-

"It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together" (Divakaruni, 2009, p.6).

And another incident of her childhood where the protagonist is full of self-doubt. Divakaruni characterized Panchaali as a dark complexion girl who feels anxious and afflicted with dark skin colour. "The other Princesses with their bright faces and cheerful banter made. Me feel doubly awkward..." (Divyakaruni,2009,P.9). The chapter named cosmology narrated the sequence of gender and ethnicity inequality. when the tutor gives her an orthodox patriarchal suggestion as she insists her not to interrupt the class with anger and also claims that the woman was the root of all the world's problems. He meant that the woman's highest purpose in life is to support men because he is a warrior and called to war, the woman must beg for his death with glory on the battlefield. All the anti-feminist opinions make her angry as she burst out 'who decide that what would be woman's highest purpose in life. The most erroneous and disrespectful opinion on the woman that disliked by Panchaali is when her twin brother Dhri, apologized on her behalf to the tutor and said-

"As you know, being a girl, she is cursed with a short, memory." (Divakaruni, 2009, p.24)

The novel consists the several chapters of the protagonist's life that has been potentially portrayed as the miserable experience of humiliation and molestation under a male-dominated society. At the time of her marriage, an archery contest was organized and only those who win can marry Panchaali. Thereupon, being a winning prize of the contest Panchaali said- "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a warm dangled at the end of a fishing" 1 (Divakaruni, 2009, p.57). The biggest and furious warrior of the time Arjun wins her hand in the archery contest. She does not even treat as a human being but as "alms" (Bhiksha). Arjun along with Panchaali and his four brothers (Yudhisthir, Bheem, Nakul, Sahdev) runs home after the contest to tell Kunti, their mother about the success (how Arjun fires an arrow to pierce the eye of a golden fish on only by

looking at its reflection in the water) and about the alms they got. Bheem said, 'mother come and see what we brought home. Chitra depicts a woman in a patriarchal accent who said-

".... As always, whatever you brought should be shared equally amongst all my sons..." (Divakurani, 2009, p.107)

This misunderstanding and motherly command forefront the protagonist Princess Panchaali had to marry all five Pandava brothers, later Panchali becomes a mother as well of five sons, one son each from the Pandava.

After the sacrifice of her dignity and serving herself in the service to her five husband's and her mothers-in-law like every other normal wife or daughter-in-law expected to do. However, like every other normal wife and as an individual expects that she would get love and respect from her husbands to equalize for her discomfort and suffering but soon she came to know her husband's limit for her as she states that - "There were other things they loved more. Their nations of honour, of loyalty towards, each other, of reputation was more important to them than my suffering" (Divakurani, 2009, p.195). Not just Pandava's love for their nation and honour, it is a male's unusual desire which made her uncomfortable and insecure and anxious.

"I didn't win all my battles. My husband's took others wives [...], Sometimes there were political reasons but mostly it was male desire." (Divakurani, 2009, p.151)

The lack of love and respect she got from her five husbands, took her to the biggest humiliation of her life, which is depicted in the chapter titles- "Sari" and "Disguise". These chapters are key incidents of the novels also. Her husbands were loyal towards each other but treated her earlier as 'alms' and now as a 'property.'

"The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave." (Divakurani, 2009, p.190)

As Duryodhan, the successor of Hastinspur along with his ninety-nine brothers (The Kauravas) and maternal uncle Sakuni invited the Pandavas along with their wife, Panchaali, Queen of Indraprastha to win their kingdoms in the dice game of gambling. As per the conspiracy of The Kauravas Yudhishtira, King of Indraprastha (and eldest of Pandava brothers) subsequently gambles away his Kingdom, his all property and even his four younger brothers. Eventually, he puts himself and loses again. Forsaken to win everything back, he puts Panchaali up as a bet for the next round and loses her too. And the time is informed about this horrific and soul threatening result of the dice game (that all the property and she also has been gambled away) she quoted- "In thinking this I was mistaken. In what happened next, the laws of man would not save me." (Divakurani, 2009, p.191)

That was just the beginning of humiliation against a woman. Panchaali, the queen of Indraprastha forcefully turned into a slave as a winning prize of the Duryodhan. And to celebrate his victory in the gambling game he orders his younger brother Dushasan to bring Panchali into the court (and the courtroom was full with 100 Kauravas, their father Dhritrashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura, Pandava brothers himself, their grandfather Bheeshma, the commander of Hastinspur, Karan, Pandava's enemy and some other great warriors (also he was a secret attraction of panchaali). "why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes too" (Divyakurani, 2009, P.192). The cruel Duryodhan giggled at his victory and mentioned Panchaali to "sit on his lap" when she refused and rebel, he instructed Dushasan to humiliates her by disrobing her-

"... Grab my hair, I begged his leave to change into suitable clothing. Jeering at what he termed my also modesty, he dragged me down the palace corridor before the shaken gaze of retainers. No one dared intervene. I found myself in Court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered Sari around me, I demanded help from my husband's. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed." (Divakurani, 2006, p.191)

However, Panchaali deals with this frightening attempt to harm woman's belongingness and with shame of exposing, by remembering her friend, Lord Krishna who advises her that- "no one can shame you, if you don't allow it" and take care of Panchaali's dignity with his divine and magical powers. Miraculously, sari (a piece of cloth that she was robbed in) was extended into endless folds. The angry queen after getting treatment that makes someone's blood run cold, which she

received from her in-laws at the courtroom full of men. She vows not to tie and comb her hair again until the day she bathes in the blood of the Kaurava brothers. (As loose hair treated against the culture for married woman earlier). That is how Panchaali prophesied the revenge battle and curse-

"All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. [...] all that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do a defenseless woman." (Divakurani, 2009, p.194)

Although, Panchaali's struggles in a patriarchal society has not stopped yet. She along with her five husbands (Pandavas) banished to the forest for twelve years followed by a year of living in an Incognito (Agyatvas) after another round of dice game. She had to separate from her children in the period of exile. All the twelve years they laboured and survive every discomfort and difficult situation. In the thirteenth year, the year of disguise, the central character had to face another incident of molestation in the city of Virat. As Panchaali become a maid for the Queen of the Virat kingdom. Meanwhile, one day Keechak, commander of King Virat's army and queen's brother threatened her to satisfy his lustful desires, which she denied. Resulted once more an abused woman was in court for justice and once again the king ignores her weeping like a deaf, and Yudhishtira was silent and calm." He pushed me to the floor in full view of the court and kicked me for having spurned him, I cried out..." (Divakurani, 2009, p.230) Later, Kurukshetra War, the dreadful battle was fought for continues for eighteen days. Everyone died who was present on the day of the dice game and let Kauravas manipulate Panchaali. Panchaali's vows also fulfil as a mark of her vengeance against the humiliation and molestation she had to face or suffered at the dice game. All Kuru dynasty was killed by Pandavas except the blind king Dhritrashtra. But that war was horrifying for Panchaali too, as she lost her father, her brother and her five sons on the battlefield.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been put her commendable effort to portrait the mental and emotional status of the female who suffered a lot under male supremacy. Lack of respect, love, devotion and preservation lead Panchaali to have a secret attraction to Karna (most of the time she felt regret to reject Karna at the time of her marriage or an archery contest) and choose Pandava brothers instead of Karna. Additionally, Divakaruni's plot of the 'palace of illusion' has modifying changes. One noticeable change in the work is after the revenge battle the Pandava's heir has been shown as a daughter who takes Panchaali's legacy but in the original text, the heir was a boy named Parikshit, their grandson who was in his mother's womb at the time of the battle although Divakaruni also brings out the attention of the readers towards the plot change as she pens down-

"But here's something Vyasa didn't put down in his Mahabharat: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman." (Divakurani, 2009, p.298)

CONCLUSION

To conclude, after analyzing some remarkable definitions of dystopia by researchers without any doubt it can be declared that dystopian vision is not restricted only to science fiction. It could also relate to others genres which illustrates the extraordinary struggle and pain in the works. Hence, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's - "Palace of Illusion" is not an English translation of the original epic although it is a historical fiction work with a reimagining of myths, assumed perspective of the protagonist with half history and fantasy with some plot changes. It has been portrayed that the central character is rebellious, brave and optimistic who try to adopt a positive mindset after every attempt at humiliation. However, with the dystopian vision, it is visible seen that what kind of rare humiliation, molestation, horrifying pain, struggle and gender and ethnicity inequality protagonist had to suffer under male dominant society.

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