

## EXPLORING THE MULTIPLE FACETS OF POLYANDROUS MARRIAGE OF DRAUPADI IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Published in 2008 by Picador, *The Palace of Illusions* is a novel by award-winning novelist and poet, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It is a critically acclaimed text, as it gives an intriguing insight to the feminine side of the otherwise patriarch tale. While majority of the authors try to focus on the warfare and philosophy of the epic, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the inner recesses of the mind of Draupadi. She narrates the story as seen from the eyes of Draupadi, retelling her joys, her desires, her adventures and her struggle through the voice of Panchaali.

Though Draupadi is an iconoclastic mythical figure, for her fiery female voice; her marriage to five of the famously heroic Pandava brothers, plays a crucial role in her life. In times, where Polygamy was quite a common phenomenon, Polyandry was limited to folklores and stories. To marry five men, was an alien concept and was regarded with contempt in those times. The rules were different for men and women, favoring the men, while restricting a woman to sleep with a single man only.

Polygamy is defined as state or practice of having more than one husband or male mate at one time. This paper analyses the Polyandry of Draupadi, her emotions towards her own marriage and her relationship with her husband's. It also highlights the reliability of the marriage, its formation and its characteristics. Thus, we will be analyzing the efficiency and nature of Polyandry in the story, through the exploration of emotions of Draupadi and her relationship with the five Pandavas.

**KEYWORDS:** Polyandry, Patriarchy, Marriage, Exploration

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### INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Divakaruni's work usually set in India often focuses on human emotions. She has written for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, myth and fantasy.

Published in 2008 by Picador, *The Palace of Illusions* is her award-winning novel, a critically acclaimed text which gives an intriguing insight to the feminine side of the otherwise patriarch tale. She presents the characters as human as possible devoid of the aura of divinity unlike the other fictional renditions of the epic. Draupadi is unique for she married five brothers, had sex with each of them and conceived children from each as well. The best thing about the

characterization is Draupadi lies in her strength and power. She is not a pitiable character, but a fictional woman with abundance of perseverance and patience. Though she has her shades of grey and white, her sketch has been brilliantly brought to the surface. Rather than rendering divinity; Draupadi's contriving mind, her pride, her jealousy, her constant battle with herself, all suggest towards the ordinary in the character.

Though Draupadi is an iconoclastic mythical figure, for her fiery female voice; her marriage to five of the famously heroic Pandava brothers, plays a crucial role. In times, where Polygamy was quite a common phenomenon, Polyandry was limited to folklores and stories. To marry five men, was an alien concept and was looked down during those times. The rules were different for men and women, favoring the men, while restricting a woman to sleep with a single man only.

Polyandry is simply defined as the marriage of a woman to two or more men at the same time. In terms of its practice, it was always rare. The amount of taboo against polyandry is rather indicative of a strong patriarchal society. In India, where woman's individuality is valued far less to that of a male species, to give the women of India such power and freedom is extraordinary.

We will now look upon various aspects of Draupadi's Polyandrous relationship, the reliability of the marriage, its formation and its characteristics. Thus, we will be analyzing the efficiency and nature of Polyandry in the story, through the exploration of emotions of Draupadi's marriage and her relationship with the five Pandavas.

## **IDENTITY BEFORE MARRIAGE TO THE PANDAVAS**

Before her marriage to the five Pandavas, Draupadi was known as the daughter of king Drupad, born out of fire along with his brother, destined to change the course of history. Throughout her childhood days, fond of her birthing miracle, Draupadi would frequently ask her nursemaid to reiterate the tale and firmly believed in her fate to change the course of history.

A dark skinned girl, she was so affixed to her destiny that she tried to imbibe all the possible education and knowledge; she thought was needed to fulfill it. Devoid of any affection from her father, and his queens, she grew up to be an impatient, hasty, short-tempered girl, rejecting all the plausible notions held for woman in the society.

Keen of her adventurous future, she was an imaginative child who dreamt of having a place of her own in the society. The idea of five husbands first pops into the picture, when she visits a sage in an attempt to know more about her future. The Prophecy of being a woman shared among five men by the sage is straightforwardly rejected by her Dhai Ma (Nanny) as she explains that though the patriarch society allowed the male gender to take up several queens in the name of alliances and legacy, a woman is limited to a single man only. A female having relationship with more than one person was considered a 'whore'.

'Now I know he's a fake! Why, in all my years I've never heard of a woman with more than one husband! You know what our shastras call women who've been with more than one man, don't you? Though no one seems to have a problem when men sleep with a different wife each day of the week!' (Divakaruni 41)

The concept of polyandry was thus an alien idea in those times. The rules were different for men and women, favoring the men, while limiting a woman to sleep with one man only at a time. The idea of polyandry made the adolescent girl explore her own self. Though the prophecy had its own charms, claiming her marriage to the greatest heroes of their time and becoming a queen of queens, she was disheartened and confused, and rather wished for happiness and a simple life, than being a mistress of five men.

## **ROLE OF KUNTI**

Kunti, the mother of Pandavas is an essential character to analyze when we study the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi. Her actions form the foundation of the marriage. The tale places Kunti in the centre, as she is the one who puts forward her voice for such an eventful marriage to take place.

The tale also hints towards her covetous attitude for her sons. To keep the Pandavas under her own thumb, she asked them to keep the honor of her words and thus divided the love of Draupadi between five men. The novel, certainly highlights the hatred the heroine carries for her Mother-in-law, for her heedless decision.

‘I recognized, too, the thinly veiled insult in Kunti’s words. This woman, as though I were a nameless servant. It angered me, but it also hurt. From the stories I’d heard about Kunti, I’d admired her. I’d imagined that if she did indeed become my mother-in-law, she

Would love me as a daughter. Now, I saw how naïve I’d been. A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away.’ (Divakaruni 108)

Being an unwise character in the tale, Kunti well-understood the patriarchal mindset, and knew that a wife who is shared by multiple men will never gain Draupadi the love she deserved. The decision, not only did leave Draupadi angry but also self-pitying. She had lost control on her own fate. Neither her husbands stood for her nor did her father have the courage to put down his self-esteem (as to have a daughter rejected by her husband and his family was considered a taboo in the ancient time). With the blessing of Vyasa, the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi took place, without her consent.

‘But now that it was to become an imminent reality, I was surprised at how angry it made me feel—and how helpless. Though Dhairya tried to console me by saying that finally had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not.’ (Divakaruni 120)

The tale perfectly brings out the emotions of Draupadi against her marriage, which bought her status to that of a communal cup, passed among the five brothers. Had it been her own decision, it would have been rightly called Polyandry. It was no more than a compulsive marriage, made mandatory to perform by the protagonist’s own mother-in-law, her father, the society and to say the least the Pandavas. The tale which glorifies war and heroism of the Pandavas; often ignores the plight of Draupadi. Her voice is damned when it comes to her own marriage. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to Panchaali, exploring the emotions of the character towards the five husbands.

## **ARRANGEMENTS FOR POLYANDRY**

Though it was one of a kind of marriage, with a woman holding power over five men, breaking the tradition of polygamy, the tale limits its scope with the arrangements of the marriage.

To keep her chastity secure, Vyasa designed an ethical code of conduct. Each brother would get to be with Draupadi for a year as a husband while the four other men would keep their distance.

During that year, the brothers were not allowed to touch her (even the slightest touch was prohibited), nor were they allowed to have a private or open conversation with her during. With the end of every year, Draupadi was to make shifts between the brothers from the eldest to the youngest consecutively. Vyasa further granted her a boon of virginity,

allowing her to become a virgin before taking another husband at the end of a year.

Though she had a treasure of husbands by her side, she was ripped off from her choice and freedom to choose among them. The arrangements favored the male dominant society, by allowing the brothers to take other wives in future, while she was married off to other four men without approval.

The boon of virginity rather suggests the hypocrisy of ego-centric male characters, which would happily take multiple wives but could not bear a non-virginal wife. In fact, it fostered harmony between the brothers rather than bringing any peace or pleasure to Panchaali herself. Even while granting a boon, Vyasa did not inquire for her wishes and placed his wisdom and societal norms above the consent of a woman.

The novel, thus brings in her yearning for Karna as a suitor, whom she rejected at the swamvyar. It quite appropriately describes the state of mind of a woman upon being tied to such a harsh and non-consensual fate. Had it been Karna, she would have been married to a single man who would stand for her rights, unlike the Pandavas who were blinded with the love of their mother and their vengeance against the Kauravas.

‘And along with that, I’d have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas. I felt I could have fallen in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness.’ (Divakaruni 121)

## **POSITION OF DRAUPADI**

Draupadi who left the comforts of a palace to blindly follow a nameless Brahmin (Arjun), the same person targeted his coldness and inner fury at Panchaali. The author tactfully employs the jealousy of Arjun and its impact on the unfortunate wife of five men. Instead of understanding her plight, he concerns himself with partition of his trophy wife. The situation is a brief example of stress and strain; a wife has to undergo while juggling her emotions between different men.

During the course of the novel, different characteristics of five brothers are highlighted, for example Bheem’s strength or Sahadev’s academic excellence. It calls our attention to Draupadi’s challenge of winning the hearts five different husbands, each one having a completely different personality. It shows her patience and versatility, which allow her to soothe the needs of a different husband, every other year.

The marriage, which buzzed the nation was rather a complex affair to handle internally. The tale which glorifies the Pandavas who followed a path of righteousness and Dharma often ignores the woman, who stood behind them. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives a unique outlook to the story, diverting the attention to the heroine, and her emotions. Her marriage paves way for majority of her actions and emotions, thus it is integral to study the polyandry in relation to her feelings.

The multiplicity of partners was not only limited to Draupadi, but her husbands also took other wives from time to time. Though the book does not detail about the other wives, but it certainly explores Draupadi’s position in the scenario. She understood the male desire and need of alliances; however, she skillfully held her position as the chief wife.

‘Still, it’s never a good idea to let one’s husbands grow too complacent. My displays of temper ensured that the Pandavas continued to regard me with a healthy respect’. (Divakaruni 152)

The fact that their destiny is tied with Draupadi; played a crucial role in securing her position. She was the gold wire on which the pearl-like Pandavas were strung. Aware of their strength as a unit, she became committed to the welfare

of Pandavas. The distance between the husbands and their wives (except Subhadra and Arjun) also ensured Draupadi remained the principle wife.

The love between Subhadra and Arjun however ignited a tinge of jealousy in Panchaali, for she craved for Arjun the most among all of her husbands. However Arjun's commitment towards her allowed her to suffer a brief heartache.

Despite holding a dominant position in lives of the Pandavas, her yearning for Karna never ceased. The book highlights the façade of polyandry through the feelings of Panchaali for Karna. It symbolizes the power of desire over marriage. Panchaali, though tied in a non-consensual affair, feels guilty for having feelings for Karna. The constant reiteration of Draupadi's feelings for Karna also suggests the failure of polyandry and its inefficiency to fulfill a woman's desire. On the outside, it might seem replete and full of desire, but its hollowness is shown beautifully in the novel.

'At the same time, I was gratified by Karna's response. Wasn't this what I'd secretly wanted all my life, to know that he was attracted to me, even against his will? That beneath his scornful exterior he held me in such tenderness? Why, then, did such a wave of sadness break over me as I heard his words?' (Divakaruni 277)

The inefficiency of marriage is also reflected when Pandavas sat paralyzed in the hall, while their wife was publically assaulted by their cousin. Despite of having five husbands, none came to her rescue. Though the marriage honored a mother's word, it failed to provide for a wife's honor. Hence, the failure of Polyandry also suggests the failure of the belief of dependence of a woman upon a man. Even the five husbands could not provide security to a single woman.

The tale of The Palace of illusions also brings out the strength of a woman and her self-dependence. In her final moments, she is left alone to die on a frozen hill. During these moments, she does not think of her husbands, rather she engages in an introspective conversation with herself. She realizes though she made love with five men, she never truly experienced love. The marriage which bought her fame and fortune, never sufficed for her desire for true love.

'Left alone to die on a frozen hill! I, whose life had been a rush of attending to the needs of my five husbands how ironic that at the moment of my own final need not one of them should be with me' (Divakaruni 351)

## **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FIVE HUSBANDS**

The novel stands apart, as it examines the relationship of Panchaali with her husbands, and hence give the readers a peep into the life of a woman married to multiple partners. The relationship with Yudishtir, Arjun and Bheem has been narrated in detail while her relationship with Nakul and Sahadev are minutely discussed.

It is clear from the very beginning that Yudishtir being the eldest brother had the foremost right on Panchaali. This very right allowed him to gamble his wife away. The novel narrates the relationship between Bheem and Panchaali, the most. Time and again it has been shown that Bheem showered his wife with love, whether it was while building the palace of illusions or during the exile. Bheem never hesitated from displaying his emotions. Draupadi reciprocated his emotions by heaping his plate higher than others. She even allowed Bheem to break the nitpicky rules of arrangements of their marriage during the exile.

Being a unique black beauty, Draupadi is said to have charmed every one of her husbands, however not even one of them made her feel fulfilled. Though the husbands did their best to keep her in high regard and respect, she felt incomplete until her death. She bore their children, accompanied them to forest, stood by them through thick and thin, yet

desire weighed more against responsibility each time. The narration straight-forwardly puts in sight the doomed polyandry through the narration of Draupadi's thoughts.

'Looking back, I see that I didn't love any of my husbands in that way. I was a good wife. I supported them through good times and bad; I provided them with comforts of the body and the mind; when in company, I extolled their virtues. I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart—was it too small? Too fickle? Too hard? Even during the best of our years, I never gave it fully to them. How do I know it? Because none of them had the power to agitate me the way the mere memory of Karna did.' (Divakaruni 213)

Her yearnings for Karna throughout the novel are symbolic of her incomplete desires and unfulfilled wishes. Her marriage was a mere means of fulfilling her destiny, she saw her five husbands more as a unit (like a hand with five fingers), rather than as individuals. Though Draupadi was the principle wife of five brothers, not one of them as an individual was appropriate enough to be called as her better-half.

The author does not shy away from exploring the pain and anger of Draupadi towards her husbands after her sexual assault. The assault strains her relationship with them as she fills with vengeance and hatred. The abundant pain even allows her to part from her own children, leaving them behind to follow her husbands, so that she could remind them of their guilt each day for thirteen years of exile.

'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. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies.' (Divakaruni 195)

The narration by Divakaruni hence explores all emotions of Draupadi towards her. It gives a fair picture of her state of mind, making the reader realize that had she been the wife of Arjun alone, Yudishtir would not have gambled her away; neither the war would have taken place. The death of Kauravas was only possible when the Pandavas would act as a unit, which was the by-product of the Polyandry itself. Hence the marriage not brings Draupadi to the center of the historic tale but also shapes the destiny of all of the major characters.

Also pointed out in a review by SFGate, 'It is her hopeless yearning for Karna - reminiscent, in its obsessive weakness, of Guinevere's attraction to Lancelot - that will ultimately trigger the war and seal Panchaali's promised role in history.'

## CONCLUSIONS

It is quite appropriate to say that there is vital link between Draupadi's marriage and her destiny. The marriage not only brings Draupadi to the center of the historic tale, but also shapes the destiny of all of the major characters. Polyandry is hence crucial to the story as it allowed the Pandavas to function as a unit in order to defeat the Kauravas.

Though the novel examines the relationship of Panchaali with her husbands, the narration seems fairly biased as her relationship with Yudishtir, Arjun and Bheem have been narrated in detail while her relationship with Nakul and Sahadev are minutely discussed.

Further, though Banerjee tries to bring out the reactions of other fellow females in regard to the polyandry, the limited characters and the scattered sketches, makes it difficult upon readers to grasp their thoughts. Thus the story remains

limited to the mind of Panchaali while the reader struggles to have a glance at the world outside.

Though it was polyandry in name, it gave no freedom, choice or consent to the heroine. In writing, we have a woman having relations with five men, in reality the code of conduct of the marriage makes it quite clear that the marriage of Draupadi is used as a mere tool to fulfill the destiny of the characters.

Hence, the failure of Polyandry suggests towards the debacle of the societal belief of dependence of a woman upon a man. Even the five husbands could not provide security to a single woman.

The book highlights the façade of polyandry through the feelings of Panchaali for Karna. On the outside, it might seem replete and full of desire and love, but its hollowness is shown beautifully in the novel. The tale of Palace of illusion thus brings out the strength of a woman and her self-dependence through the never heard voice of Panchaali.

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