Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
July-December 2023 4(2), 5891– 5896

UNVEILING DIASPORIC SHADES OF DRAUPADI'S CHARACTER IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Rachana Pareek [1], Dr. Devendra Kumar Sharma [2]

[1] Research Scholar, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author

Rachana Pareek,
pareek.rachana@gmail.com

DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.6293

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

This research paper reconnoiters diasporic dimensions inveterate in the character of Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions which is feminist retelling of the Hindu epic The Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. Draupadi's voice reformed by Divakaruni is amalgamation of diasporic consciousness that is both rooted in tradition as well as entrenched by anxieties of modern existence. Through a feminist and postcolonial lens, the present research paper unveils complex layers of cultural displacement, hybrid identity and psychological exile of Draupadi's character. Draupadi emerges as a transnational symbol of exile, resistance and identity negotiation rather than existing merely as a mythological figure. Bringing forth Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Stuart Hall's fluid identity model this study illustrates how Draupadi transcends time, space and cultural fixity. Her displacement from heaven, internal fragmentation, longing for identity and belonging and assertion of self-narrative are key aspects of diaspora. The Palace of Illusions reconstructs Draupadi's Narrative as a cultural precinct where diasporic voices reclaim agency, reassemble memory, and rearticulate the feminine within postcolonial mythography.

Keywords: Female Diaspora, Identity, Migration, Marginalization, Mythography

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of migration is inexplicably interwoven within the intricate matrix of the subsistence of humans. Either syntagmatic or paradigmatic, they have constantly relocated throughout aforesaid realms, which are commonly referred as Diaspora. The literary and cultural study of the Diaspora has a long history and has undergone numerous metamorphoses. Readers and researchers have been compelled to reread it as a vastly different area of academic study due to the ongoing changes inside and outside of it brought on by forces like globalization, modernization, the interdependence of the world's economies, cultural interpellation, transnationalism, etc. It has undergone stages of evolution since the biblical exodus to the pre-colonial era, the post-slavery time, the post-colonial period, and the present era of multinationalism. Its chameleon-like- appearances and epistemic denominations have made it necessary to view it as an indispensable theory and praxis of contemporary human experiences both synchronically and diachronically.

This ever-expanding field of study has received varied and vigorous contributions from the theorists of Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, Post Colonialism, Post Modernism, Cultural studies, and Cultural Theories.

The Diaspora word has its origin in the Greek verb Diasperio, consisting of two words; 'dia' means over, and 'sperio' means 'to sow'. This term first appeared in the Septuagint bible to describe the scattering of Jews from their homeland Judea to various regions of the globe. In 586 BC the Jews were exiled by Babylonians and in AD135 by Romans from their homeland Judea. Thus, even before Diaspora studies gained prominence as an individual discourse, Jewish Diaspora is referred to as a paradigmatic case. In English the term Diaspora first appeared in 1876 to describe the Irish refugees, migrating to various countries to survive 'The Great Hunger'. About eighty million people migrated from Ireland in this great exodus. (Kumari 54).

The modern world has witnessed a significant increase in the migration of masses from third-world countries to advanced countries such as the USA and the UK. Easy transportation, liberal visa policies, and other amendments in rules and regulations of host countries can be a reason behind this upsurge in motivation to migrate. This mass movement of people to the USA, UK, and other developed countries has also emphasized the need to study and define Diaspora from a different point of view yet it has always remained a challenge for theorists to accommodate these several Diaspora events like exile, slavery, migration, and transnationalism into a single framed concept of Diaspora. In the very first issue of the journal Diaspora (1991), William Safran listed six qualities that may be referred to classify any ethnic group as a Diaspora. These are listed below:

1) Dispersal from one's own country to two or more other countries.
2) A shared memory, vision, or myth about the geography, history, and achievements of the nation must be alive in their minds and hearts.
3) The conviction that they are not and will never be completely accepted in the host culture. They usually feel isolated.
4) They always think of returning to their homeland as soon as conditions are favorable.
5) All members are committed to the restoration, preservation and protection of the original homeland.
6) A strong feeling of ethnic identity, individuality, shared past and shared destiny.

The construction of culture and identity as a whole is addressed differently by the two significant schools of thought: structuralism and post-structuralism. The structuralists explain the identity formation process through the philosophy of self, which is absolute and final. It fuels the melting pot theory, according to which migration occurs from the weaker and less developed peripheral region to the stronger and more developed central region. Diaspora is defined by structuralists as the separation between home and host, or self and other, whereas post-structuralists assert that everything is on a continuum, and in this way a magnificent 'Bricolage' is the result of this process of cultural mixing and hybridity. Poststructuralists oppose the concept of concrete, absolute, and monologic identity. It defines identity as fluid, polyphonic, multiple, everchanging, hybrid, and devoid of the center. This dual reality and ambivalence prevent the immigrant from fully assimilating into the host country's culture. His diasporic awareness is still in flux, tinged with nostalgia, pastiche, and medley. Every time a migrant decides to settle in a foreign nation, he makes an effort to interact with and fit into the local culture, he has two options to choose from in this process: Assimilation and integration. He rarely fully integrates into the culture of the host. He picks up the language and customs of the host nation. His own country's language, culture, and religious values are still preserved, and he always feels proud of it. He embraces the rules, codes of conduct and etiquette of the host nation. Assimilation, on the other hand, results in a person losing their identity as they accept the culture of their new home. It involves acculturation. Thus, assimilation results in forced identity, which results in the loss of the person's previous native identity, while integration results in a hybrid identity. People from the Indian Diaspora typically choose integration. Even in the host culture, they maintain their traditions, customs, clothes, eating habits, language, and festivals, whilst adhering to the host culture's laws, morals, dialect, and manners. A hybrid identity or plural identity results from this. Stuart Hall's concept of being and becoming explains this hybrid identity as an integrating model of essentialism and social constructivity theory. As Hall espouses in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), "The Diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by the conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (Hall 12).

A person's cultural identity is a dynamic process that is the outcome of several experiences of his present and his past. A community's unique values, ethos, and beliefs are emphasized through the 'Essentialism approach'. This is a

shared cultural spirit that transcends time and space. Therefore, when a person inherits the values and beliefs of his community, he also gains a culture that transcends time and space. This approach completely disregards interpersonal relationships and personal experiences. 'The Social Constructivist Perspective' completely disavows Essentialism. It asserts that nothing in civilization is eternal. Social interactions continuously mold and modify it. Thus, cultural identity is fluid and diverse. It disregards the importance of a community's shared cultural ideas. Hall combines the being and becoming-focused perspectives. He avers, becoming is a result of one's social interactions while being is a common cultural belief. A person's cultural identity is formed by how the past and present are negotiated. It establishes a third space in the Diaspora where an immigrant's fluid and multifaceted cultural identity may develop. "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think," he asserts. "It is a production that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222).

Homi Bhabha, who popularized the term Hybridity in the language of Diaspora, emphasizes the legitimacy of the transnational subjectivity of the Diaspora in modern cultural production. He calls it self- reflective as well as a revolutionary act of cultural translation. This hybridization or in-between third space held by the Diasporic subject is rife with creative potential. He states in The Location of Culture (1994), "It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduce creative invention into existence" (Bhabha 7). Avtar Brah in Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities (2002) designates this Diasporic Space 'as a highly contested site', he delineates, "Diaspora space is the intersectionality of Diaspora, Border, and dislocation as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, and disavowed…" (Brah 208).

Diasporic mythmaking is quintessentially Indian. The great epics of India both Ramayana and Mahabharata share the theme of homelessness through varied characters proving the importance of Diasporic loss as a creative thrust and as a narratological trope. Hence a Diasporic mythography is a retelling of mythology in which myths of the homeland are presented to bear upon the harsh realities of the Diasporic experiences.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels provide an extensive and nuanced depiction of the diasporic experiences. Her vivid storytelling encapsulates the psychological and emotional turmoil encountered by her diasporic characters caught between their homeland and hostland. Divakaruni's characters navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation, dealing with issues of identity, belonging, and longing for their roots. Mishra et al. in "Exploring Diasporic Elements in the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" examines realities of identity and its constitution of transformation within the diasporic realities through the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. They conclude that the characters in her novels represent the realities of multiculturalism, cultural fracturedness, multiplicity and dissimilation as well as myth, isolation and history.

The Palace of Illusions is a captivating rewriting of the ancient Indian epic the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective who is the female protagonist of the novel. She is portrayed as a mythological heroine as well as a diasporic figure. Although the tale is set in ancient India, the diasporic concept is central to Draupadi's physical and emotional dislocation. Draupadi's identity, hardships, and voice reflect the experience of diaspora, transcending both time and place. Draupadi's representation in The Palace of Illusions represents a metaphorical and psychological diaspora, reflecting alienation, cultural dislocation, and the fight for self-identity, all of which are consistent with postcolonial diaspora themes despite the mythological setting. Divakaruni uses Draupadi to channel the diasporic woman's voice, expressing resistance, reflection, and identity negotiation. Her first-person narration allows her to reclaim the agency traditionally denied in the epic. "I was more than the daughter of a king or the wife of famous warriors. I was Panchaali" (Divakaruni 11). Through Draupadi, Divakaruni reframes the Mahabharata's epic scope to explore diasporic themes of dislocation, gendered identity, and cultural negotiation. Draupadi's internal and external journeys echo the alienation and resilience central to diaspora literature.

Draupadi and her brother Dhrastadhumna were born as a result of a sacred Yajna in order to exact retribution on Dronacharya for insulting her father. She is an unwanted child right from her birth, as Draupadi's birth from fire exemplifies her peculiar or, as we would say, forced exile from heaven to earth. She lived in heaven with her brother prior to her birth, but they were compelled to return at the command of King Drupad. However, since her arrival on Earth, she has always been treated as an unwelcomed child. Her father, Drupad, did the Yajna in order to create a son who could avenge Drona's insults. Even her Dhai Ma called her out as a girl who was not invited. Recounting the day when Draupadi took birth out of fire she believes that her father, Drupad the king of Panchaal was too inclined in pleasing his subjects that he did not disapprove of her openly. King Drupad had to accept her, as his long-awaited son was almost clinging to his twin sister Draupadi. This act of her brother clinging to her is deeply ingrained in her consciousness. "We

clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together" (6). As an immigrant, Draupadi feels abandoned by her new community. She suffers from identity issues right from the onset of her life journey, as her father names her typically as Draupadi, 'Daughter of Drupad' (5) while Dhrastadhumna meant, 'Destroyer of enemies' (5). Her remarks reflect her dismay, mixed with dissatisfaction she says, "Couldn't my father have come up with (a name) something a little less egoistic?" (5) This ignites the journey of her rebellion.

Draupadi's journey begins in a palace that is not truly her own; she was raised in her father's palace. As a diasporic person attempts to emulate and assimilate host culture, she imitates queens in order to conform to royal customs. Though she has no nostalgic memories for her departed homeland, she is incredibly captivated by her new abode. Her embarkation from heaven and restoration in her father King Drupad's château both had a significant impact on her perspectives regarding her life. Throughout her upbringing, she strives to fit in with the palace's customs. She strives to model herself after queens who appear exquisite to her, particularly Queen Sulochana. She always feels uncomfortable and outcast meeting other princesses. "If someone addressed me- a guest or a newcomer, usually, who didn't know who I was- I tended to blush and stammer and (yes, even at this age) trip over the edge of my sari" (9). In order to restore and preserve her original homeland she feels only and completely connected to her brother Dhri. "We shared our fears of the future with each other, shielded each other with fierce protectiveness from a world that regarded us not quite normal and comforted each other in our loneliness" (7). She feels a unique and special bond with Krishna too due to their similarity of complexion.

She is foretold to alter the path of history. She also learns about her future castle through a forecast. For her, her own palace would be her true abode. She was very fascinated to know that there will be a swayamvar in her honor, and she will be given an opportunity to choose her life partner during the occasion. She was excited at the very prospect of falling in love with any of the great warriors and then choosing him as her spouse. Again, she was strictly told to select Arjun as her husband from among the suitors, all of her ambitions and ideas were dashed. Now, she feels as "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (57). She feels deceived because her marriage ceremony will serve to boost her father's political position. She feels tricked and rejected once more because, on Kunti's orders, she marries all five brothers. She contemplates Kunti, "A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away" (108). In a way, she has prevented her sons from being divided. After her marriage to the Pandavas, her life is completely reshaped. Her marriage to the five Pandavas and subsequent banishment exacerbate her internal sense of otherness. She is constantly striving for a sense of belonging, which is a key component of diasporic identity. "I wasn't a wife in the usual sense. I was never a beloved. I was a valuable possession" (74). She is always an outsider in her home. Her husbands do not share their internal disagreements with her. They consider her as an outsider in their personal issues. They behave in really weird ways, which made her contemplate. "Did the massacre at Khandav Forest torment him? I would never know. Though they must have disagreed with each other from time to time, my husbands never revealed their dissension to outsiders. (And in this matter, I was still an outsider.) Kunti had trained them well" (143). Diasporic identity of Draupadi precisely correlates to Walker Conner's concept of 'Homeland Psychology'. Walker Connor in "The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas" (1986) coins specific term 'homeland psychology' characterized by group of people residing away from their homelands and discoursing about identification of homelands. He explicates:

In such an environment, diasporas are viewed at best as outsiders, strangers within the gates. They may be tolerated, even treated most equitably, and individual members of the diaspora may achieve the highest office. Their stay may be multigenerational, but they remain outsiders in the eyes of the indigenes, who reserve the inalienable right to assert their primary and exclusive propriety claim to the homeland, should they so desire. (Conner 18)

Draupadi's experiences underscore how diaspora intersects with gender. She is often silenced or spoken over by male figures, including her husbands. The disrobing scene becomes a metaphor for the ultimate stripping of agency, a trauma many women in diaspora literature face. "They looked at me as though I was no longer a person. I was spectacle, shame, vengeance" (Divakaruni 197). She turns her attention to Krishna, Karna, and her future palace. Finally, Panchaali repented the end of her life as follows:

I consider my life. What was it that made me joyful? What made me experience peace? … I'd ridden all these years, delighted one moment, distraught the next. Certainly, none of the men or women I'd been close to had given me that type of neither joy-nor I them, if I were to admit the truth. Even my palace with its strange and beautiful fantasies, the palace that in some way I'd loved more than any of my husbands, the palace that was my greatest pride, had ultimately brought me only sorrow (352).

She constantly looked for eternal love in her relationships and even in material possessions, but she never discovered it. For her, being at home always meant being passionately in love and affection with someone, which she never was. She believed that having one's own passions, objects, or companions would provide her with satisfaction, which proved to be fallacious; it is on her deathbed that she realizes true meaning in her life, her love for Krishna, "Krishna's love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape. How blind I'd been not to recognize it for the precious gift it was!" (356). her journey for homeland and identity finally receives its climax with this realization. In the shape of divine love of Krishna all her questions are answered, "Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere" (360). Much like a person traveling in search of his home she ultimately locates a home in the shape of Krishna. Her true love for Krishna is like a palace made of eternal and infinite things. In contemporary times, a similar mixture of processes known as Diaspora has emerged, with William Safran describing the entire process with three crucial words. He has stated that a person who is in exile from his homeland goes through three major processes: displacement, homelessness, and return to that motherland. Draupadi in The Palace of Illusions depicts all three phases: her consciousness of displacement from paradise, her persistent sense of homelessness, and an associated yearning for a rerouting in her real home, which leads her to final destination, Moksha.

Her complex identity, formed through displacement, alienation, and hybrid cultural positioning, aligns closely with postcolonial diaspora theory, especially as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall. Through these frameworks, Draupadi emerges as a figure negotiating multiple cultural spaces, identities, and power structures. Homi K. Bhabha introduces the idea of 'unhomeliness' as a key condition of diasporic and postcolonial identity. For Bhabha, the unhomely moment "creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself... taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of exile" (Bhabha 9). Draupadi's life is marked by such "unhomely" moments. Though she is born a princess, she constantly struggles to belong—to her father's kingdom, to her husbands, and even to the palace she dreams of creating. Her physical exile during the forest banishment reflects this state of being neither here nor there—a liminal condition that mirrors the diasporic in-betweenness Bhabha describes. "Even when we built Indraprastha, I knew it was not mine. I was only its queen, not its maker" (Divakaruni 112). This sense of dislocation is psychological as well as physical. Draupadi inhabits a 'third space'—a hybrid, negotiated cultural identity that Bhabha argues is never pure or stable but constructed in the in-between spaces of cultures and histories (Bhabha 55). Her identity is shaped by her mythic heritage, gendered experience, and inner voice, all of which resist categorization within a singular role (wife, queen, possession, or daughter).

Stuart Hall, in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," asserts that identity is not a fixed essence but a constantly evolving process— "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 225). Hall's theory of 'being and becoming' allows us to understand Draupadi's identity as dynamic and formed in relation to historical trauma, storytelling, and her own acts of resistance. Throughout The Palace of Illusions, Draupadi re-narrates her story, repositioning herself in opposition to the male-dominated epic tradition. Her first-person voice is an act of reclaiming agency and reconstructing identity, aligning with Hall's idea that diasporic subjects engage in a constant negotiation of self through memory, myth, and voice. "They made me into a myth, forgetting I was a woman, that I lived and breathed" (Divakaruni 360). This act of narration itself is a diasporic gesture—it resists erasure and reclaims space within a dominant cultural narrative. Draupadi's identity is fragmented, shaped by loss, exile, and marginalization, yet also resilient and self-fashioned. Hall's notion of identity being constructed "through, not outside, difference" (Hall 226) becomes evident in how Draupadi defines herself against societal expectations and patriarchal control.

Combining Bhabha and Hall allows a nuanced view of Draupadi as a diasporic and hybrid subject—one whose gender intensifies her alienation. She is displaced not only geographically (through marriage, exile, and war) but also socially, as she is never fully accepted or integrated into any role society imposes on her. Her five husbands never truly center her in their loyalty; her kingdom is not hers; and her voice is constantly challenged. In this way, Draupadi represents a gendered diaspora, where exile is lived through relational, psychological, and political displacement. "How often I had to swallow my voice. To be queen was to pretend, to perform" (Divakaruni 153).

As Bhabha argues, hybridity emerges in the space where cultural authority is ambivalent, where the colonized (or in this case, the marginalized woman) articulates difference and subverts essentialist identity (Bhabha 112). Draupadi embodies this hybrid condition—both insider and outsider, both myth and woman, both agent and victim. By analyzing Draupadi through the postcolonial diaspora frameworks of Bhabha and Hall, we understand her not as a static mythological character, but as a diasporic subject negotiating identity across borders—of geography, gender, and power.

Her 'exile' is not just a physical event but a metaphor for the continuous fragmentation and reconstitution of identity that lies at the heart of the diasporic experience.

2. CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shapes Draupadi not only as a mythological figure, but also as a diasporic consciousness struggling to relieve spaces of exile, displacement, and longing. The situation of many forced exits, identity fragmentations, and contradictory desires that Draupadi confronts in her life parallels the diasporic reality in which the feeling of belonging is never fulfilled. Her continuous striving to balance personal agency, patriarchal and cultural restrictions dwelling on the same and her search for home which keeps eluding her throughout life all serve in placing her as a metaphorical figure of the migrant psyche. Subsequently, by recounting the story of Draupadi through the filter of memory, nostalgia as well as estrangement, Divakaruni transfigures her into a diasporic trope, which resonates with the generalities of migration and cultural displacement. In this way, Draupadi ceases to be a mere recreation of an epic heroine becoming an eternal diasporic voice, reflecting the fractured yet steadfast identity of those living in between worlds.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.

Brah, Avtar. Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities. Routledge, 1996

Connor, Walker. "The Impact of Homelands upon Diasporas." Modern Diasporas in International Politics. Ed. Gabi Sheffer. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. 16-46.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. The Palace of Illusions. Anchor Books, 2008.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.

Kumari, P. Prasanna. Diasporic Consciousness in the Select Novels of Chira Banerjee Divakaruni. Lulu Publication, 2018.

Mishra, Parmendra Kumar, and Veerendra Kumar Mishra. Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Diasporic Consciousness. Sarup Book Publishers, 2021.

Mishra, Veerendra Kumar, et al. "Exploring Diasporic Elements in the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." Design Engineering, issn: 0011-9342 | year 2021, issue 6, pp. 1386-1400.

Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." Diaspora.vol.1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 83-99.