

A Feminist Icon

The *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a fresh take on the classic Hindu tale, Mahabharata. The author, an Indian-American author and poet, took a character that was overshadowed in the original epic, and brought her thoughts and perspectives as a female living in a primarily patriarchal society to life.

Although the retelling of myths and legends aren't exactly novelty in today's literature, Divakaruni's themes embedded within the book were bold statements, especially in a culture such as India's. According to the U.N., India ranks 131 out of 188 countries in terms of gender equality (Doshi). Not only did she turn the Mahabharata's admittedly sexist ideals inside out, the very publishing of this book was a retaliation against the discrimination that women still face.

Of course, I'd like to give the author credit where it's due. Much like Panchaali (originally known as Draupadi), Divakaruni was a strong female that wished to go against the destiny that was set for her because of her gender. In an interview, the author herself said that because classics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana were important ethical landmarks, it is important to go back and give attention once more to female characters and thus re-evaluate women's lives, rights, and value in society (Mehta).

Panchaali

The novel revolves around Panchaali. The readers get to witness how her desires grow from girly fantasies into a tired vengeance, and how helpless she is in the face of the relentless dharma and karma. Even with the current of dharma surging against her will, there is also the matter of her gender that keeps her boxed in a places where she does not wish to be.

Ever since Panchaali's childhood, she has been pining for a stronger manifestation of her apparent destiny. Both she and her brother Dhri were born of fire, both set with great destinies that shall change the course of history, yet her brother seemed to have the more grandiose future. Although Dhri was slated to slay his own guru in the future, people still loved and accepted him as their prince. On the other hand, Panchaali received colder treatment from the populace.

Education also comes into mind here. Dhri received lessons that were more interesting to Panchaali, while she received lessons on how to be a good wife. The elders did not desire for her to begin questioning the world around her, and yet she did. Eventually, with the deprivation of the same education that Dhri got, Panchaali was bullied into staying where a woman should remain--in submission.

Having her life dictated by choices made by the people around her, Panchaali found relief in the fact that she'd be choosing her own husband. To her disappointment, though, she found out that the tournament for her hand was going to be rigged. Afterwards, she even had to marry five of the Pandava brothers, never receiving the love she truly wanted from any of them. Except for the latter part, this is reflective of India's still-existing dowry system (Ramakrishnan). Families pay for their daughters to be married. Not only is this system an arranged marriage, it is also a system that makes females feel like they are tokens being rewarded to men.

I lived in a place where I could interact and make friends with many Indians. Some of them no longer subscribed to the dowry system, even proudly proclaiming that they are now Catholic, yet many said that they still do. The latter group of people rejoiced with the birth of a son, for this is a good omen. Why not? They were going to be receiving dowry money in the future, not the other way around. When asked why they still followed the dowry system, they said that it's just how it is; statements that are reminiscent of Hinduism's conviction to dharma.

All of the aforementioned events happened (and are still happening today) due to the hegemonic ideals that men are somehow the superior gender. According to Panchaali in her youth, power was something that men happened to have more. Perhaps this is the whole truth. However, she still managed to change things with her power. With her advice, the five kings and their queen became the best monarchs of their time. Then, this poses the question: is women's power limited to whispering suggestions to a powerful man's ear?

In the novel, I note that queens were known for their loyalty to the kings and to their royal children. Kunti was known for raising her five sons alone, Gandhari was rewarded a boon for choosing to stay blind together with her husband, and eventually Panchaali was known for being a loyal wife to the Pandava brothers. It is a sad reality that exists in their culture; but, the story shows that Panchaali struggles greatly against this reality. She wanted to change how women were treated.

Towards the end of her life, Panchaali created a women's court, and even a women's market. She accepted that whatever womanly hardships she had once been through, the poor had it worst. This was a realization that came to her after the Great War, after seeing all the widows lose their "purpose" with the loss of their husbands. She tried to impart unto them the same blaze that she held in her heart--that her purpose came within herself, and that although husbands are important, they were not the reasons for her existence.

Virtue

Even though Panchaali remained loyal to the husbands she was sworn to, her heart remained somewhere else. That alone is enough to incite sin, and that made her unvirtuous. Even on the hike to the sacred peak of the Himalayas, Yudhisthir acknowledged that this was what kept her from being virtuous enough to approach the peak. Karna had always been her romantic interest, from when she was a young woman set to be married and even until the time that she had already borne five children.

There were many times where Panchaali was tempted to help Karna in his unfortunate life, but all the time, she was bound by duty not to. If she had helped Karna on the day of her wedding, Karna would not harbor feelings of resentment, and Panchaali would not have to incite the Great War. Although her husbands were free to have as many wives as they pleased, Panchaali did not have the same luxury. Although she had five spouses, they were all forced upon her as her duty.

Is being virtuous, then, a duty placed upon a person at birth, like Yudhisthir? Considering Panchaali's situation, there was no way for her to be truly virtuous. The heart is a fickle thing, and hers yearned for Karna and his lonely eyes. Had she been male, she--he could have married all the people he desired. There would be no need to bind oneself to a duty that required the fiercest loyalty.

Icon

It occurred to me, then, is Panchaali an iconoclast or a role model for feminism in this generation? Supposedly, she subscribed to the Hindu system of belief. She was raised in a very collectivist (as well as hugely patriarchal) society. To the eyes of a typical member of that society, she is stubborn and selfish for not conforming to the system that has worked for them for the longest time. In a collectivist society, she had very individualistic dreams as a child; she wanted to be a great queen known for her castle, and not her king, she wanted to learn things that only the men should learn, and most of all, she wanted to experience romantic love. To them, she was inciting disruption of the harmony.

To the typical reader, however, she could be a role model. She was strong and ambitious, and she was always ready to learn new things. Perhaps the reader would even feel sorrow for her choices in life, wherein she never told Karna in physical form how much she loved him from afar. The people within that society with the same culture, however, might even criticize how she remained in love for so long.

I can then say that Panchaali is neither an antagonist or protagonist of her own culture or of feminism. One cannot simply say that someone's culture is wrong, for that is the very standard of morality for the people that subscribe to that culture. Hence, Panchaali going against these beliefs, although anti-patriarchal and progressive in terms of Western perspective, can't exactly be called the right thing to do. In the same manner, we cannot say that she is a great feminist icon, for she had neglected the women

of her kingdom for too long before taking action, and neither did she perform acts that would be hailed as “liberating” for a woman in her position.

Panchaali is simply a woman who performed her duty to the greatest player of all time--Time. Her life communicates to us that however unfair life may be, this is for a greater purpose. Definitely, life is unfair. Especially if you are born a woman. This has been true since the time the Mahabharata was written, or maybe even earlier than that.

Hearing Panchaali’s voice, however, helps even out the playing field. Women have long been outcasted to the footnotes, mentioned only for their beauty or their loyalty to their men. This novel reminds us that gender discrimination is real, and still exists to this day. Every time a reader relates to Panchaali’s woes, this reminder remains true. This novel in itself *is* the feminist icon; and so, *The Palace of Illusions* is a book that speaks for women and asks the people to question the existing hegemony on patriarchy.

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