A Palace of Her Own: Feminine Identity in the Great Indian Story

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Abstract:

Along with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, literally, is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical- spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. Two contemporary examples of explicit attempts to retell the epic in novel form are Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). These shall be analyzed in the following, as the texts not only invite criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but furthermore allow a comparison of the way they present the interaction between gender and politics. Whereas Tharoor uses the epic to provide an allegorical frame and backdrop for a satirical narration of India's political struggle for independence in the 20th century, Divakaruni chooses to retell the epic from the perspective of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives.

1   Along with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is one of India's "great stories", and the ancient epic maintains its status as a culturally foundational text which, apart from philosophical/spiritual values, educational and religious instruction, contains and perpetuates ideas and ideals of ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and gender roles. Having inspired writers for centuries, references to the epic, its central legends or characters, are ubiquitous in literature. An explicit attempt to retell the epic in novel form is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which will be analysed in the following. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender.

2   Dating back to 1600 B.C. and considered to be the world's longest poem, the original epic consists of 100.000 stanzas in verse, structured into 18 books, thus exceeding by far the length of the great Western epics such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* (cf. Narayan, R. vii). Although there are many different versions and uncertainties about its exact date of origin and authorship, it is commonly attributed to Ved Vyasa, who also appears as the narrator in the epic, telling the stories to his scribe, the elephant-headed God Ganesh. The structure is inherently dialogic, if controlled by an omniscient male narrator. Whereas "Maha-bharata" means "great India", the title first chosen by Vyasa was "jaya", meaning triumph or victory (Narayan, R. viii), an implication which is certainly challenged in Divakaruni's rewriting. The main plot, which like the *Arabian Nights* digresses from one story into another (cf. Singh 10), tells the tale of the fight for supremacy in the kingdom of Hastinapur.[1] The conflict erupts between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who are the progeny of two brothers, Pandu, and the blind king Dhritarashtra. The rightful heir to the throne, Yudhishtir, and his four brothers, are exiled by their jealous cousin Duryodhan. All five Pandavas are married to the beautiful and headstrong princess Draupadi after Arjun, the handsome and virile warrior, wins her hand in an archery contest. A climactic scene is the game of dice in which Yudhishtir gambles away all his possessions, his kingdom as well as Draupadi, who vows revenge for their shame. In the final battle of Kurukshetra, everybody dies except Draupadi and her husbands. After their only remaining heir, Parikshit becomes ruler over Hastinapur and peace is restored, the brothers and Draupadi embark on a final journey into the Himalayas where they find eternal redemption.

3   Just from this brief summary one can deduce why Alf Hiltebeitel, who has dedicated his scholarly life to the study of the *Mahabharata*[2], states that its academic reception is commonly centred on its "monstrosity" due to the text's sheer size, indeed presenting what Henry James would have called a "baggy monster" (2001, 1). The scholarship on the epic is, of course, extensive. Yet, as Hiltebeitel (2001; 1980) has argued, it has rarely been treated as a coherence fictional work, although this is changing, as recent and highly informative

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[1] Apart from countless legends, the epic contains one of the most sacred texts of Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of the famous dialogue between Arjun and Lord Krishna on the battlefield about the difficult choice between good and evil, culminating in Krishna's exegesis of "karmayoga", i.e. the obligations of dharma and man's necessity to fight the 'just' war (cf. Brodbeck/Black 6).

[2] Alf Hiltebeitel has written extensively about the *Mahabharata*. In his detailed analyses of individual legends, scenes and characters, particularly interesting is the focus he places on Draupadi and the disguises of the Pandavas (cf. 1999; 2001; 1980). Although arguing more from a mythological-historical than from a gender-theoretical perspective, he generally emphasizes the centrality of the role of Draupadi.

studies such as Brodbeck and Black's focus on gender and narrative in the epic show.[3] Principal themes are the results of vengeance and the human potential for destruction, love, sacrifice and loyalty, while problems and possibilities of rule are staged on various levels, e.g. individual, societal, and cosmic. Of central importance is the human struggle with destiny and the ethical concept of *dharma*.[4] Moreover, as Brodbeck and Black emphasize, "gender is one of the most central and most contested issues in the text, and […] discussions regarding gender operate on a number of different levels and are manifested in multiple ways without the text providing one consistent and definitive view" (10). In the present context, which refers to the epic[5] mainly indirectly, the complex world of the *Mahabharata* is treated as a fictional-literary one and reduced to the characters and scenes of particular relevance for a gender-theoretical analysis. The focal point is Draupadi (Panchaali), who is given a different presence by Divakaruni, yet also has a crucial, distinctly gendered function in the original. Taking the narrative situation and the dialogic textual orientation into account sustains the argument for a surprisingly (post)modern ambivalence and complexity of the gender roles conveyed in the contemporary text, which is already palpable in the ancient epic. Therefore, some issues in terms of gender and the relation of the sexes in the *Mahabharata* deserve consideration before turning to the novel.

4   The fact that the study of the epic's many characters and sexualities in the text has found critical interest is hardly surprising.[6] As stated above, the "*Mahabharata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (Brodbeck/Black 11; Sanzgiri). The desire for revenge is a central trait linking the sexes who are otherwise assigned clear differences in appearance, behaviour, as well as character and obligation of dharma. Fighting being one of the main gender-distinguishing activities, the masculine ideal is commonly represented by the virile husband

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[3] Brodbeck and Black (2007) offer a good introduction to the study of gender and more literary-oriented approaches to the epic. Their essay collection also includes an extensive bibliography of research on the *Mahabharata*.

[4] "Dharma" is a complex term with context-dependent diverging connotations; it is central in Hinduism and Indian philosophy. Generally it refers to any conduct with aids the upholding of the order of society, thus including notions of general ethical laws, rules, customs, as well as individual obligation or vocation.

[5] The epic is originally written in Sanskrit verses. An accessible translation in English prose is R. K. Narayan's (2000).

[6] See for instance: Bhattacharya, Pradip. "Epic Women: East and West – Some Observations." Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 37.3. (1995): 67-83; Doniger, Wendy. Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Falk, Nancy. "Draupadi and the Dharma" Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion. Ed. Rita M. Gross. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977. 89-114; Goldmann, Robert. "Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India." Journal of the American Oriental Society 113.3 (1993): 374-401.

and fearless warrior. This is complemented by the portrayal of the epic's principal model of femininity, the ideal of the loyal, devoted wife (cf. Brodbeck/Black 16-17). A striking example for this is Gandhari, who decides to follow her husband, king Dhritarashtra, into blindness and sacrifices her sight by wearing a silk scarf over her eyes till her death. Yet things are more complex than a binary of the silent, passive, merely listening or following female and the actively battling male. The epic puts forth a second paradigm of femininity (Śri), which has mythical connotations and implies female independence, mobility, and agency, showing the women as important contributors to their husbands' successes. Nonetheless, as Brodbeck and Black rightly stress, both of these roles "are restrictive, only representing women in relation to their menfolk; but in terms of the behaviour of female characters, there is a sense in which neither paradigm is complete in itself" (18). While in particular Draupadi, as well as her mother-in law Kunti, is representative of this dual role and the inherent tensions, this shows how the epic transgresses essentializing gender models in favour of more fluid or contradictory ones. Andrea Custodi describes Draupadi as on the hand being "extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands", yet on the other is often shown "to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous" (213). Seeking to assign mythological references to this trait of her character, Alf Hiltebeitel sees Draupadi as an invocation of Kali/Śri-Lakhsmi, the goddess of destruction (1980, 153).[7]

5   Read against the background of contemporary notions of gender, the epic's central characters, prominently Arjun and Draupadi, "manifest different modes of gendered behavior at different moments in the narrative" (Brodbeck/Black 21), illustrating the idea that gendered identities interact with particular situations as well as with markers of social class (caste), ethnicity, or education. Many characters unite opposing qualities with regard to their identities. Yudhishtir is the aggressive ruler and gambler, yet famous for his stoic endurance, kindness and wisdom; Arjun is virile lover and hero of the battlefield but also spends a year as an "effeminate" dance instructor. Like Gandhari, Draupadi is a fiercely loyal wife and a hot-tongued critic of her husbands, hence at once "active and passive, articulate speaker and symbolic listener" (Brodbeck/Black 21). This later aspect is important with regard to her portrayal in the novel. Furthermore, clear power hierarchies are established via the dialogical structure of the text, through the gap between the authority of narrators and listening characters, which often ardently await instruction of how to become better men or women (cf.

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[7] Hiltebeitel (1980) gives an in-depth analysis of the mythological references of the disguises of Arjun and Draupadi as well as of the gender ambiguity of Arjun.

Brodbeck/Black 23). With regard to female education and knowledge, a significant ambiguity can be found in the epic. As Brian Black points out, the women undergo a second-hand instruction as they are usually a constant presence in all scenes, watching when men receive important teachings and hearing their stories, yet this eavesdropping "is far from passive" (53). Therefore, Black argues, the central female characters, though mostly confined to the background, emerge to shape the story in significant ways and the stance taken towards their agency appears thoroughly ambivalent, as:

> for both Gandhari and Draupadi there is more to being a listener than merely their symbolic presence. The way in which both of them are constituted as subjects shows that they are not merely defined and portrayed in relation to male characters, that what they hear and say is linked up with their specific duties and circumstances as queens: […] Draupadi's role as listener […] educates her for her role as *dharma* queen. (73)

Divakaruni's version portrays the education of Draupadi and her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen in subjective detail. Following first her brother's and then her husbands's lessons, she also receives many instructions on her own (e.g. by a sorceress, a sage, or Krishna). Regarding the multi-dimensional presentation of femininity, Divakaruni's narrative appears in many ways merely faithfully modeled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader insight into the mind of the listening Draupadi.

6   Although one has to guard against taking the enthusiasm for this too far, the challenge of normative gender roles is moreover aided by the various "gender-bending" characters (Brodbeck/Black 19).[8] All the while the idea of the third sex stems from ancient India, the epic does by no means break with a binary framework. In this context Andrea Custodi emphasizes that: "As fluid as sexual characteristics and gender may be among deities and in mythological escapades, however, dharma as it structures and orders this-worldly affairs revolves around a firm conception of the two genders, and is very much based upon their clear distinction and eternal stability" (210). The characters' fate and gender identity remains usually stable, determined by birth, status, and the customary expectations connected to them. Still, there are several instances of transsexualism, of sex changes from man into woman or vice versa. A prominent example is Sikhandi who switches sex in order to fulfil a mission of revenge; according to the ancient rules she has to give up womanhood in order to kill her nemesis Bhisma. Most sex-changing episodes, while drawing attention to the fluidity of

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[8] See especially Custodi's essay "'Show You Are a Man!' Transsexuality and Gender Bending in the Characters of Arjuna/Brhannada and Amba/Sikhandin(i)" (in Brodbeck and Black 2007). She employs psychoanalytical theories for her reading and presents an interesting analysis of the great variety of forms and diversity of characters (e.g. androgynous gods, male-female/female-male sex-changes, transvestites, eunuchs).

gender, show elements of transgression of the traditional categories, but are playful enough to not subvert the existing order for good. An example for this occurs during the Pandavas' year of disguise; Draupadi and her husbands are forced to spend their final year of exile in hiding before embarking on the mission of reclaiming their kingdom. As cover, each of them has to choose an identity as opposite to their previous one as possible. The disguise forces Draupadi into the role of a chambermaid. She thus becomes socially inferior, almost an outcast (cf. Hiltebeitel 1980, 153), while the alpha-male Arjun is transformed into a eunuch dance instructor, his virile masculinity symbolically turned into sexual abstinence (150).[9] While many critics make well-founded arguments for Arjun's disguise as an invocation of the androgynous god Siva (cf. Hiltebeitel 1980, Custodi), the year in disguise brings an accentuated reversal of the gender roles between Arjun and Draupadi, highlighting ambiguities that occur, in fact, throughout the narrative. Draupadi is depicted as increasingly dynamic, impatient, and even aggressive, which is contrasted with her husbands', especially Yudhishtir's and Bhim's, more passively enduring, and gentle nature, or Arjun's newly effeminate, playful character. As Custodi comments, "not only are physical sexual characteristics put into question, but on a psychological and behavioural level as well, Draupadi wears the proverbial pants while Arjuna wears the skirt" (213). In this context Hiltebeitel draws attention to fact that "Draupadi's disguise and actions […] hold strong associations with defilement" (1980, 169). In more than one way is her role bound to tasks and behaviour 'improper' for a royal heroine, which in the Indian context has strong implications of caste, impurity and transgression. A strength of Divakaruni's novel is the empathic rendering of these scenes. Furthermore, the analysis will show how the sex change of avenger Sikhandi contrasts with Draupadi's challenging of gender roles and how the narrative develops the relation between femininity and vengeance. Agreeing with Hiltebeitel that the disguises reveal more than "univocal mythic associations" (1980, 173), the ancient epic already seems to allow for multiple identities and shifts between different sides of personality. Therefore it provides a fruitful ground of investigation for modern notions of gender as fragile, conditional, and part of constantly queried identities. But such an argument certainly requires the "recognition that the epic also evokes, through its symbolism, certain

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[9] According to Hiltebeitel "the epic descriptions leave it amusingly imprecise, and ambiguous whether Arjuna is physiologically a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, or simply a transvestite" (1980, 154). Arjun is dressed as a woman, yet as it says in the original text, "he has something of a man, something of a woman" (156). This is also reflected in his new name, Brhannada, "a name in the feminine gender meaning the 'great man'" (157), which sustains the implied references to Siva, a God uniting all three sexes.

cultural themes, myths, ritual practices, and social norms that are not fully attested historically until 'post-epic' times" (Hiltebeitel 1980, 151).

7   The influence of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* on Indian authors is pervasive, regardless in what language they write (cf. S. Narayan, 46);[10] Meenakshi Mukherjee even refers to episodes from these epics as the ground on which "the imagination of most Indian writers was sustained" (9).[11] Still, the idea of using myth to synthesize cultural heritage with the realities of contemporary society and the fascination with myths as 'eternal' stories about human nature, are not an exclusively Indian phenomenon.[12] One example with parallels to Divakaruni's literary project is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a revision of the *Odyssey*, focusing on Penelope and her twelve hanged maids.[13] Choosing as her guiding question, "what was Penelope really up to?" (Atwood xxi), during Odysseus' long absence, Atwood aims to throw light onto the gender-bias and the inconsistencies in the Homerian epic. In similar fashion, Divakaruni explains her motivation to write the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective and to put "her life, her questions, and her vision" (PI, xv) center stage, because

> her destiny that was foretold when she was born, her insistence on doing what none of the other women around her were doing and her unique situation—being married to five brothers—all made her the perfect choice. I was also interested in the fact that in some ways she was the catalyst for the great war — and perhaps the one who suffered the most as a result of it.[14]

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[10] Numerous examples can be found especially in recent popular mainstream fiction. For instance: Amish Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy* (2010), Amreeta Syam's *Kurukshetra* (1991), Ramesh Menon's *Blue God: a Life of Krishna* (2000) and *The Hunt for K.* (1992). Like R. K. Narayan, Menon has also translated the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* for modern re-tellings in prose form.

[11] Another explicit retelling of the *Mahabharata* is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor uses the epic to provide an allegorical frame and backdrop for a highly satirical narration of India's political struggle for independence in the 20th century. He focusses in particular on the ethical implications of dharma to make a claim for India's history of (ethnic/religious) diversity and peaceful coexistence.

[12] Transcending the Indian context, it is also interesting to consider collections such as Jack Zipes's Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986) which includes re-tellings of classics like "Sleeping Beauty" or "Red Riding Hood" and other tales, revealing them as stories of transgressions and power, culturally established to aid the socialization and acceptance of gender roles. See also Marina Warner's From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.). In her book "Texts of Terror" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) Phyllis Trible offers a feminist reading of biblical narratives, seeking to highlight the presentation of victimized women and to give a voice to abducted slaves and raped princesses. Reading Divakaruni's novel also places ancient tales in a contemporary critical context and refocuses the view on gender issues and power hierarchies in a culturally foundational narrative.

[13] In 2005, publisher Canongate launched its Myths Series, inviting authors from around the world to re-tell ancient stories. Apart from Atwood's, feminist revisions feature prominent in this series, e.g. Jeanette Winterson's Weight, a modern take on the myth of Atlas and Heracles, or Ali Smith's Girl Meets Boy, a queer narrative which employs the Iphis myth from Ovid's Metamorphoses.

[14] Divakaruni in an interview on the publisher's website.

Another aspect has intrigued the author since her childhood, as she recalls that, "listening to the stories of the *Mahabharata* as a young girl […], I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women" (PI, xiv).[15] Although the female characters possess plot agency, complexity, and destructive power or dazzling beauty, Divakaruni states that,

> they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever wrote a book … I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. (PI, xiv-xv)

8   Traditionally, Indian society is firmly patriarchal-oriented with an established segregation of the sexes and the family is of crucial importance. Consequently, these issues and the suppression of women are current topics in Indian writing and especially in Divakaruni's fiction. Stressing the concern with sisterhood and female bonding in her works, Urbashi Barat explains how Indian feminism developed differently than in the West and how contemporary fiction reflects that women's relationships remain to a larger extent "governed by the power politics of patriarchy" (Barat 47). Considering this aspect it is interesting that Jasbir Jain, in his survey of Indian women's writing in the 21st century, argues that while gender and location continue to be major preoccupations, critics should seek "to liberate contemporary women's writing from overworked gender concerns" (Jain 7). He claims that a shift took place in the vision of many writers who

> have moved from the subjective towards a larger social canvas, crossed over to positions which emphasize the vulnerability of all human beings irrespective of sex, are less inhibited about emotional and sexual lives, and have acquired a new sense of subject-hood. Social and religious institutions as imagined and crafted by patriarchy are no longer taken as the given. Women's writing has moved beyond concerns with the self and the other. (Jain 12-13)

One can agree with Jain if one places this argument in a broader critical context. Because similar to the way and sense in which postcolonial writing has moved beyond a "writing back in anger", or postmodernism beyond a mere celebration of openness and uncertainty, feminist writing has transcended the rebellion of "us vs. them". The pressing question nevertheless remains then which theories should be used to "open" texts if one wants to avoid overused labels or categories, "gender" and "postcolonial" surely being among the ones surfacing

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[15] In her essay "What Women Share", the author explains how she perceived the "aloneness" of the heroines of South Asian mythology as bewildering and how this informs her own writing today: "[…] the main relationships the heroines had were with the opposite sex: husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important friends. Perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, I find myself focusing in my writing on friendships with women and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, mothers and lovers" (Divakaruni 1999).

almost reflexively in an Indian literary context. Nonetheless, even if having moved beyond a victim position, which is clearly the case with the text under scrutiny here, important theoretical constellations and coinciding agendas persist between feminist and postcolonial criticism. Because here we still find the "political, social and religious conspiracies against the subaltern", which are caused by "major influences on the formation of gender relations, that is, the development of the patriarchal form of family organization, the formation of the caste hierarchy and politics, and the impact of the male domination in religion […]" (Navarro-Tejero cited in Lucas, 108).[16] Although this issue cannot be dealt with in detail here, the fact that most theory comes from within the Anglo-American academy and hence from a predominantly Western perspective calls for caution, or at least acknowledgment, before applying it to a reading of texts from a different cultural sphere.[17]

9   Regarding the scene of contemporary Indian women's writing, international bestsellers like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* or Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and the quality and variety of fiction by authors like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, or Bharati Mukherjee spark academic interest in India and abroad. In comparison to these writers, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner observes,[18] "formal literary criticism addressing her [Divakaruni's] work is rare, a situation likely to change as her books are given more attention in educational circles" (43). Divakaruni is a representative of India's educated, politically active elite of expatriate writers.[19] Frequently compared to Bharati Mukherjee (cf. Shankar 65), she is seen as giving a voice to female Asian immigrants and to portray the struggle with hybrid identities in her fictions (Mandal 115). Apart from

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[16] In her analysis, Antonia Navarro-Tejero focusses on the relation between gender and caste in the fictions of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan. This aspect, which also plays an implicit role in Divakaruni's novel, generally deserves close attention in the study of Indian fiction and also in the Mahabharata, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

[17] I have laid out this debate and its critical implication in the context of Anglophone Indian fiction elsewhere in more detail (cf. Hoydis 2011, 34ff; 73). In general one needs to exercise caution against categorizing values, power hierarchies and aesthetic phenomena without reflection on the their historical, social, and cultural specificity. As Kumkum Sangari memorably put it, "the crisis of meaning is not everyone's crisis" (184). Postmodernism's perceived void of value and its aesthetic representations appears itself marginalized as a phenomenon in a context where issues like decolonization, the struggle for national or personal freedom and justice, and inequalities of race, class and gender are pressing concerns. See also: Kapur, Geeta. "When Was Modernism in India/ Third World Art?" South Atlantic Quarterly 92.3 (1993): 473−514; Mukherjee, Arun P. "Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?" World Literatures Written in English 30.1 (1990): 1−9; Roy, Anjali. "Postmodernism Goes Native: Decentering Narrative in Recent Indian Fiction." The Post-modern Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990s. Ed. Viney Kirpal. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1996. 383-399.

[18] Cf. Buley-Meissner (2010) for a good current overview of Divakaruni's fiction and criticism of her works.

[19] Born in Calcutta in 1956, Divakaruni was educated and now lives mostly in the US. Holding a Phd from the University of California, Berkeley, she has been teaching literature for years and is also politically active, e.g. she has helped to build shelters for Afghani women and has been involved with an organization working with abused women in the San Franscisco bay area. She has published novels, poetry and short story collections, children's books and a play.

cross-cultural perspectives, feminist issues (i.e. women's oppression, arranged marriages, sisterhood etc.) continue to shape her works.[20] Making her agenda explicit Divakaruni wrote: "I really wanted to focus on women battling and coming out triumphant" (cited in Mandal 116). The author's interest in a fusion of art forms characterizes her writing as well as an "ideologically" interesting mix of Hindu traditionalism, spiritualism, and emancipated feminism. While her first novel *Mistress of Spices* (1997) already experimented with magical realism and Hindu myths, she takes up these elements again in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

10   Criticism of the novel often sees the mix of Hindu scripture and fiction as making Indian reader feel uneasy (Dasa), or claims that the "mysterious potency of myth translates badly into commercial fiction" (Lindner). Scholarly reception often assesses the text, despite acknowledging Divakaruni's poetic imagery and lucid style, as a failed attempt of making the epic's grand sweep of time, place and characters fit into a single novel (cf. Dunn, Lindner). All critics agree on the ambitious scope of the project, typically referring to the fact that Peter Brook's famous theatre version of the *Mahabharata* lasted nine hours, while Divakaruni compresses it into just 350 pages. But perhaps, like Atwood's novella *Penelopiad*, one needs to read the text as an addition, rather than as an alternative version of the original, as a re-writing which complements a picture without claiming comprehensiveness. Divakaruni's text works both for readers who grew up with knowledge of the epic and those exposed to it only in this revised, condensed format.[21] The novel fills many gaps, not just because historical fiction dealing with Hinduism, written for Western audiences, is generally sparse, but because above all, it presents both a spiritual and irreverent feminist retelling from the viewpoint of Draupadi (Panchaali). This dramatic change de-thrones many of the male heroes, which appear to be "no longer the perfect supermen" (Dasa). Divakaruni also shifts the focus onto marked silences, e.g. on the grief of the widows after the battle of Kurukshetra. Another twist is the focus on Panchaali's intimate friendship with Krishna, but more importantly her secret love for Karna which "reminiscent, in its obsessive weakness, of

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[20] On the subject see especially Divakaruni's essay "What Women share" (1999) and Urbashi Barat's essay "Sisters of the Heart: Female Bonding in the Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." (2000). Sisterhood is a major theme which the author most obviously explores in her first volume of short stories "Arranged Marriage" (1995) and her second novel Sister of My Heart (1999), which expands on one of the stories, "Ultrasound", from this collection (cf. Barat 54). Although the topic is not at a preoccupation in Palace of Illusions, the chosen epigraph, a poem from the 3rd millenium BC, reveals the authors emphasis of shared history between women: "Who is your sister? I am she. Who is your mother. I am she. Day dawns the same for you and me."

[21] In her attempt to modernize a classic of Indian culture and to present it to an international readership, Divakaruni not only has to face the fact that her readers possess widely diverging knowledge of the original text, but the general struggle of the Indian writer of having to make their world comprehensible to foreign audiences by walking "the fine line between touristy exoticism and untranslatable authenticity" (Tharoor 1997).

Guinevere's attraction to Lancelot […] will ultimately trigger the war and seal Panchaali's promised role in history" (Lindner). The decisive change in comparison to the original in which female voices are usually "filtered through a battery of nominally male subject-positions" (Brodbeck/Black 23), is the subjective account of a heroine who, driven by her desire to change the course of history, "owns up to a mass of flaws: pride, jealousy, arrogance, stubbornness, vanity, self-absorption, and (most threatening) unfulfilled romantic yearnings" (Lindner).

11   The opening chapters present Draupadi's obsession with her origins and introduce her rebellious character as well as her struggle for a feminine identity of her own making. Indeed, listening to the story of her birth and her prophecies about her destiny seem to signify as "the only meaningful activity for her" (Nair 151). She dreams of leaving her father's palace, a suffocating place for her, which "seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (PI, 1). Her nurse calls her teasingly "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (PI, 1), as she was born as daughter to one of the richest kings in India, yet¬¬ — in best mythological fashion — emerged from the fire unexpectedly, clinging onto her twin-brother, the long awaited heir. While her brother is named "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", she is called "Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (PI, 5), a name she considers to affirm patriarchal dependency and to be unsuitably at odds with the divine prophecy made at her birth: "she will change the course of history" (PI, 5). From the start the narrative highlights an important relation between names, gender, and identity. Draupadi envies in particular the power and agency inherent in her brother's name, the implied mission of his life to kill the archenemy Drona, while hers merely symbolizes patriarchy. Full of self-doubts about her outward appearance, which deviates radically from the ideal of the 'fair' woman, she asks Krishna "if he thought that a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that people termed it blue was capable of changing history" (PI, 8). This question testifies to an awareness of a double marginality, a felt inequality of the heroine in both ethnicity and gender (if not, obviously, in terms of class/caste). From the start she fights "to position herself as a subject who desires and not as an object of desire" (Nair 152). But the results of her refusal to be a victim of circumstances and her aspiration of attaining "a more heroic name" (PI, 5) are shown to be deeply ambiguous as the story unfolds, fusing justified claims of equality and liberation with guilt, vanity and cruelty. Finally, it will prove almost "ironic that a name that she fancied for herself, 'Off-spring of Vengeance', turns out to be true" (Nair 152). She consults a sage about her destiny and learns that: she will marry the five greatest heroes of her time, be envied like a goddess, become mistress of the most magical palace, then loose it, start the greatest war,

bring about the deaths of millions, be loved, yet die alone (cf. PI, 39). Moreover, in her lifetime she will encounter three moments that can potentially mitigate the catastrophe to come; significantly the sage's advice is related to not speaking and controlling her emotions in those moments ("hold back your question", "hold back your laughter", "hold back your curse"). The name given to her by the sage, "Panchaali, spirit of this land" (PI, 41), excites her due to its power, it is "a name that knew how to endure" (PI, 42).

12   From the beginning, Panchaali starts to narrate her life story and dreams of possessing her own palace one day. Thus she claims both a place for herself and narrative agency, seeking to establish her identity by rootedness in a location and control over her life and its presentation to others. Tellingly, she imagines her future palace full of "colour and sound", mirroring her "deepest being" (PI 7), a statement which hints at the desire for dramatic significance and "brilliant theatricality of her life" (Nair 153). According to Nair, who emphasizes the centrality of the theatrical metaphor, Panchaali appears as a character who wants to take center stage in her own play; she is aspiring lead actress and not satisfied with a supporting role in someone else's script (154). The metaphor is appropriate because Panchaali's life and the self-perception of her character are constructed around a dual struggle. This concerns, on the one hand, the attempt to harmonize different, conflicting roles into one stable identity, on the other hand the constant fight for the attention of others. With regard to her desired audience, she attaches a special importance to the men in her life, i.e. especially the unattainable lover of her dreams, Karna, her friend Krishna, and her husbands. The seeking of male attention, as well as the struggle (and often refusal) to balance her different roles according to the requirements of specific situations, are themes running through her life, causing much suffering.

13   She rebels against an education of typically female skills (painting, sewing, poetry), which she perceives as useless in comparison to the knowledge taught to her brother (lessons about royal rule, justice, power). Again she uses a metaphor of suffocation to describe the life awaiting her: "With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me" (PI, 29). Yet after her father reluctantly agrees to let her partake in Dhri's classes, she starts to notice how these transform her further and deepen the difference to what she has been trained to perceive as feminine. She observes how it was "making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech" (PI, 23), and finds it increasingly harder to resign herself to the restrictions of royal womanhood. In response to the tutor's idea that "a woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (PI, 26), Panchaali realizes that her ambitions makes her an outsider of her own sex: "Each day I thought less

and less like the women around me" (PI, 26). Repeatedly, the narrative refers to her perception of differences and the awareness that: "For better or worse, I was a woman" (PI, 139). As she learns to employ her femininity strategically, e.g. to dazzle and manipulate through her looks, she forces acceptance on both men and women around her: "I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty!" (PI, 10). Soon afterwards, a sorceress makes Panchaali recognize her central flaw, her vanity, and the power of women, as despite all their dependency on men, "you're wrong in thinking of woman as an innocent species" (PI, 66). But the main lesson she tries to teach Panchaali is the control of her passion and her own destructive power, reminding her that she does not "have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary starstruck girl. The consequences of your action may destroy us all" (PI, 88). Throughout the narrative Divakaruni has her heroine ponder on the inevitability of fate, the discrepancy between the perception of others and her self-image. The central tension exists between her desire for independence and the attempts to please and conform, which is increased by recurring confrontations with gender differences. Watching her husbands for the first time after her marriage, she observes: "I was a woman. I had to use my power differently" (PI, 99). This is followed by recognition of her inequality with regard to freedom, as well as reputation. Despite being granted independence from her father and the status as queen, her unconventional polyandrous marriage bears the risk of being seen as an insatiable whore (PI, 118). Moreover, according to the special marital arrangements, Panchaali is split between her husbands, spending a year with each, her virginity restored each time when entering a new husband's bed. She becomes aware that in contrast to her husbands, she "had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when" (PI, 120).

14 The plot action as well as the heroine's identity are developed through narration, which appears to some extent as a process of self-interpretation (cf. Nair 156). It also reflects her crucial reliance on outward influences for her happiness and identity; continually she struggles to construct a self to be set against the patriarchal construction of her self. Actively seeking out affirmation, or dreaming of Karna's forbidden love, she is usually shattered when she discovers any discrepancy between her fragile self-image and her perception by others. Although the novel is for the most part a first person narrative, there are frequent switches of perspective, mainly through the incorporation of dreams or stories told by other characters. Additionally, Vyasa, Panchaali's grandfather, appears several times, reminding heroine and

reader that the story is already written and the outcome fixed.[22] On the one hand, through these devices Divakaruni "contrive[s] at least some of the omniscience of the epic narrator" (Ansell 2008). On the other, the narrative, itself motivated by a change of perspective of its ancient model, highlights the importance and the illusionary nature of perception and narrative transmission. There is always the possibility of deception, just as there is always another angle to the story. The novel opens with three narrators (Panchaali, her brother, and her nurse), presenting different versions of the tale of Panchaali's birth and destiny. While trying to gain power over the narration, Panchaali's reflections, her dialogic engagement with her implied listeners, also include meta-narrative comments on the nature of truth and narration: "At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing" (PI, 15). Throughout the narrative one finds a dual view on stories as powerful and "true", as well as subjective and refusing to be fixed in time or space, likely to change with each telling. Creating a parallel between storytelling and identity, the narrative situation reflects on the process on a inter- and metatextual level. Furthermore, regarding the prominence given to dialogic negotiation, it is noteworthy that Divakaruni captures this element of the original epic in her first-person narration. Analyzing the inherently dialogic structure of the *Mahabharata* Laurel Patton[23] argues for a correlation between the multiple perspectives and an emphasis on a plurality of identity. Basing the argument on gender theory, she refers to "the dialogical, gendered self" as "a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from" (Patton 198). Such a discursive, performative notion of gender, which might appear as a theoretical given nowadays, and which lies at the heart of Divakaruni's novel, can be seen to operate already in the ancient epic through its construction of characters and narrative structure.

15   In many ways, the novel is a Bildungsroman that chronicles Panchaali's process of gaining knowledge about herself and the world. The rebellious, yet also somewhat naïve girl eventually becomes a governess and wife, whose advice is frequently sought by her husbands. Apart from the plot-changing moments when her passions take control of her words, she mostly manages to temper her outspokenness, and "having learned more of the workings of women's power", is "careful to offer my opinion only in private" (PI, 148). After a decade of married life and being mistress at the eponymous palace of illusions, Panchaali appears noticeably emancipated. This is not just due to the power to rule over a place and

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[22] In the epic, "Vyasa is the great-uncle of the Pandavas and their fathers biological father; he appears at many points in their story to give them advice and assistance of various kinds" (Brodbeck/Black 3).

[23] Cf. Patton's essay "How Do You Conduct Yourself? Gender and the Construction of a Dialogical Self in the *Mahabharata*" (in Brodbeck and Black 2007). In order to demonstrate the negotiation of gender ideology in the epic, she focusses her reading on the dialogues between Draupadi and other women.

family of her own but because, as Vyasa tells her: "You no longer care what people think of you, and that has given you a great freedom" (PI, 180). It is an, at least partial, liberation from outside judgment. Her identity is no longer primarily constituted in relation to the expectation of others. This gives her some of the independence she perceives as being granted naturally to men, and so she feels that, "in some matters, I was equal" (PI, 180). From a gender-theoretical point of view, it is interesting that her change and her transgression into male realms (independence, power to rule, revenge), are reflected in a transformation of her demeanor and outward appearance; she turns from beautiful, desired woman into one which is feared or rather sought to be avoided due to "my tangled hair, my accusing sighs, my pepper-hot tongue" (PI, 216). She is herself aware that she loses some of the attributes of traditional femininity (e.g. softness, beauty, silent companionship) and continues to compare herself to other women, who appear "better", i.e. softer, more patient or content. Again the narrative presents a dialogic negotiation of judgment, mediated through the voice of the heroine, revealing the contradictions between inward and outward perception. Torn between her own desires and the expectations of the feminine roles lived by the women around her Panchaali comments: "(But is *better* the word I was looking for? At what point does forbearance cease to be a virtue and become a weakness?")" (PI, 210). Often, she is shown to oscillate between passivity and activity, as the following statement about her husbands illustrates: "I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart […], I never gave it fully to them" (PI, 213). Relevant with regard to this aspect is her obsessive romantic yearning for Karna, which is a revolving point for the plot action. Although it appears, as most critics have noted, in many ways no quite plausible, it seems to fulfill an important function by offering her an escape fantasy which protects her from emotional abuse und complete surrender to her husbands and her situation. This becomes clear in the climatic scene of her public shaming in court.

16   After Yudhisthir's fatal loss in the game of dice, Duryodhan takes possession of the kingdom, Panchaali's palace, and the Pandavas themselves. Panchaali is informed that she has been gambled away like property, "no less so than a cow or a slave" (PI, 190). When she is dragged into the hall, the whole court stares at her, but worst of all is that her husbands send "tortured glances but sat paralyzed" (PI, 191). She is stripped of all ornaments, yet the ultimate shame is the command to take off her sari, the only item of clothing protecting her from "a hundred male eyes burning through me" (PI, 191). The scene of Draupadi's

disrobing[24] is also a crucial one in the *Mahabharata* and it is obvious how her humiliation is rendered as a distinctly gendered shame. She appears "furious at her mistreatment, […] hair disheveled, menstrual blood spotting her single garment" (Hiltebeitel 2001, 246), forced to expose her vulnerable body to male eyes, reduced to the status of an object lost by her husband. In the novel, Panchaali describes the situation thus: "The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time" (PI, 193). What furthers her rage is the silence of all men present; nobody answers her question if Yudhistir actually still had the right to lose her after he had already lost himself. Consumed by her anger and the desire to restore her dignity, Panchaali commits the prophesied third mistake and utters the dreadful curse of the battle, which will destroy everybody and vows not to comb her hair again till "the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (PI, 194). Significantly, she chooses to give up part of her traditional femininity for revenge, as particularly in India shiny fragrant hair symbolizes female beauty. After this, there exist diverging versions of the epic. In the critical edition, Draupadi's nakedness is exposed; whereas in the more popular version (cf. Hiltebeitel 2007, 128ff), Krishna appears as an answer to Draupadi's prayer, saving her from shame by miraculously extending her sari, the endless folds preventing the final satisfaction of the voyeuristic stares. The question of divine intervention usually takes priority in readings of the scene, which is rarely interpreted from a feminist perspective. In the novel, Panchaali deals with the shame of exposure by remembering Krishna's advice; she finds the mental strength to cut herself off from the reality of the situation, instead focusing on people dear to her.

17   Despite the image of victimization, the scene presents a clear assertion of female strength and agency. After sealing everyone's fate, it makes Panchaali aware of her illusion about romantic love. She comes to recognize the limits of her husbands' feelings for her; "there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering" (PI, 195). She also notices how she had been consumed by passionate anger, in contrast to her husbands who stoically suffered the humiliation and controlled their desires for revenge by submitting to the expected protocol, patiently waiting for the circumstances to turn in their favour. The situation triggers a painful act of emancipation for Panchaali who is forced to protect herself as men fail her, while also learning how "emotions are always intertwined with power and pride" (PI, 195). Furthermore, the fact that Duryodhan takes over her beloved palace

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[24] Hiltebeitel (2007, 110) gives a good summary of the scene and of its conflicting interpretations. He also emphazises the relevance of Draupadi's special friendship with Krishna which is highlighted by Divakaruni.

increases her hatred and unhappiness to such an extent that she describes her emotional state thus: "She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear" (PI, 206). It is significant that for the first time she describes herself as seen from the outside. The quote underlines the importance of the experience of shame and loss of her palace, which had formed such an integral part of herself, as catalysts for the tragedies to come. Although the focus on compensation and revenge henceforth give her a clear sense of purpose, she is still missing a feeling of stable selfhood:

it seemed that everything I'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchaali. (PI, 229)

18   Throughout the narrative, the desire for and the execution of vengeance is presented as the central trait transcending the boundaries of gender, yet affirming them at the same time. While Panchaali spends her life struggling to control her passionate temper and her thirst for revenge culminates in causing the killing of thousands, her husbands are constructed as her counter images in terms of patience and stoic obedience of rule and custom, all the while, of course, enjoying the freedom of action attached to their status as men. Although Panchaali's desire and speech trigger the war, she does not actively fight in it but remains confined to a position of eyewitness. At various points in the story it is implied that a woman's body is incapable of fulfilling a mission of revenge. One night during battle, Panchaali dreams of killing her brother who is disguised as a Kaurava prince. The dream expresses her feeling of despair from watching everybody close to her die, from facing her own impotence and guilt. Transformed into a man in the dream, she experiences a feeling of sameness, a kind of gender-empathy, because she feels the familiar hatred and desire for revenge, yet now she is actively able to kill. In contrast to this brief imaginary switching of gender, Panchaali's half-sister, Sikhandi, undergoes a permanent change, being transformed into a "great and dangerous warrior" (PI, 44) in order to partake in the battle. Although her appearance and behavior are markedly different, she describes her new identity thus: "When I awoke, I was a man. And yet not completely so, for though my form was changed, inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for" (PI, 46). She retains this ambiguity about her gender. Watching her in battle, Panchaali notices how she still looks

"male from a certain angle, female from another" (PI, 256). Like Panchaali, Sikhandi is driven by vengeance and rebellion against men's greater freedom of action. Early in the narrative she describes an insight in the inevitability of emancipation, similar to the one Panchaali has during her shameful disrobing in court. She argues that women need to fight for themselves to restore their dignity because, "wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever" (PI, 49). Inspired by Sikandhi's sex change as the ultimate liberation from the restrictions of womanhood, Panchaali is aware from the start that: "I, too, would cross the bounds of what was allowed to women" (PI, 51). As shown above, her behavior frequently transgresses the boundaries of traditional femininity, e.g. her outspokenness, her education and her polyandrous marriage. Furthermore, she fails to display a strong attachment to her children, valuing her independence higher than motherhood. To be at the side of her husbands, she leaves her sons behind, barely recognizing them years later. Emphasizing the centrality of vengeance for the construction of female identity, Andrea Custodi[25] states that "there is a dark, destructive, lethal undercurrent to Sikhandin's female-to-male transsexuality" (220) that differs noticeably, e.g., from the Arjun's playful male-to-female transsexual episode during the year of disguise. Agreeing with Custodi's argument about the epic, it is obvious how Divakaruni's novel focusses on the "destructive undertones in the character of Draupadi, who never switches genders but […] challenge[s] the epic's explicit dharmic formulations of what a woman and wife should be" (220). Moreover, the narrative underlines how the trajectories of the characters of Sikhandi and Draupadi "away from 'traditional' femininity are towards vengeance" (220), feminine vengeance thus forming a major plot-driving force, but, perhaps more importantly, constituting a dominant strand of femininity in both original *Mahabharata* and its feminist retelling.

19   The last part of the narrative adds another dimension. During the battle Panchaali is most shocked to find that her self-perception (as the brave woman wronged, admired for enduring hardships) is completely at odds with the opinion of the women around her, who, consumed by their own suffering gaze only in fear at "the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows" (PI, 258). The portrayal of the battle of Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni's most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. The focus on the subjective female consciousness is here broadened to draw attention to what is omitted in the older text: "But here's something Vyasa didn't put down in

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[25] Custodi's essay is generally based on the idea that in the epic notions of masculinity are more pronounced than those of femininity. It surely points towards interesting further research on the subject, but is not congruent with the angle of Divakaruni's novel and the present analytical context.

his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman" (PI, 298). Highlighting the grief of the women, the narrative presents a different angle of the morale of the battle between families and thoroughly blurs the distinction between kin and enemies, between winners and losers. After the battle, the grieving widows try to jump onto the funeral pyres. Faced with a mass sati, which would add unimaginably to the tragedy of the war, king Yudhisthir is rendered helpless: "If it had been a battle, he would have known what kind of command to give his men. But here he was at a loss, paralyzed by guilt and compassion and the ancient and terrible tradition the women had invoked" (PI, 312). This crisis forces Panchaali to finally prioritize sisterhood over her own interests and emotions. She steps forward to address the crowd, speaking as a woman and mother sharing their grief and manages to avert more deaths (cf. PI, 314). The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur "largely a city of women" (PI, 322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. She takes action, but this appears now to be driven less by personal than political interest and feelings of community: "It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women" (PI, 323). Divakaruni's feminist agenda underlines this almost utopian vision of a new city rising from the ruins, now a haven of safety and respect, a place of equality for women: "And even in the later years […], Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment" (PI, 325). This is sustained through another plot change. Whereas in the original the only remaining heir to continue the Pandava line, is a son, Divakaruni turns Parikhshit into a daughter, who takes on Panchaali's legacy and realizes a peaceful female supremacy.

20   The analysis has shown that Draupadi is far a from a univocal representation of the ideal Indian female, always torn between devoted wife and independent, outspokenly critical woman. Nancy Falk writes: "She is a throwback; her stories come from a time when women were more highly respected than in the days of the meek and submissive wifely models" (cited in Brodbeck/Black 16). Divakaruni's narrative can be seen to highlight this perception of femininity. Moreover, the plurality of roles (wife, mother, queen etc.) within the story can itself explain the shifts and inconsistencies in Draupadi's character. Divakaruni makes this tension one of her focus points and presents Panchaali's distress and suffering caused by the fragmentation of her different selves. This is illustrated once more by Panchaali's decision to follow her husbands on their final journey. Again she is both loyal wife and rebellious woman, as no other before her had ever attempted to climb the Himalayan Mountains. When her strength starts to desert her, she reflects:

> Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain. […], my last victory over the other wives […]. How could I resist it? (PI, 343-44)

The quote shows the complex mix of emotions and demonstrates the ambiguous, finely tuned assessment of Panchaali's character in the novel. It portrays her as a model of female empowerment and courage but casts a clear critical-humourous glance on her vanity and desire for admiration. Even her death is staged ambivalently in this regard. When she jumps from the pathway it appears to signify a brave acknowledgment of having reached the end of her powers and as a final cry for attention because her last tormenting thoughts are about which men in her life would have turned around to come to her rescue. But the arrival in heaven brings a surprising relief for Panchaali, who notes: "The air is full of men – but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing. Their faces are unlined and calm, devoid of the various passions that distinguished them in life" (PI, 358). The gods are presented as people without a sex, beyond passions, and thus in a state of androgynous, peaceful balance. Finally, emotions are singled out as the element marking character and gender differences, beyond all other deceptive guises. Panchaali's death appears as liberation and resolve of the contradictions of her identity: "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (PI, 360). It remains for the reader to decide whether this ending appears spiritually consoling or pessimistic, as the reconciliation of her troubled female identity and recognition of her self is denied her on earth. Divakaruni's novel manages to convey the "great psychological depth" (Dasa) of the *Mahabharata* and reflects on the various illusions the characters have about themselves, about romantic love, about heroism, war, and vengeance. If "in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy" (Nair 153), Divakaruni modifies this view and makes the question of female agency a more complex one. Resisting simplifications of matters which have fascinated audiences for over 2000 years, the great Indian story reminds us of many aspects of human nature and also of the fact that "[t]o the question posed by these myths – How deep is gender? Is it skin deep, superficial, or truly deep, essential? – Hinduism answers Yes" (Doniger 1999: 301).

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