



Articulating The Voice Of The Tacit In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Select Novels, The Palace Of Illusions And The Forest Of Enchantments

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Abstract

Women are the life-changers in a society irrespective of caste or creed. If given an opportunity, they will rise above self and achieve success. This article explicates the pragmatic life of characters ranging from the humble Kunti, charming Hidimba, devoted Sita and youthful Urmila. These pragmatic characters are proponents of the power of love and sacrifice. They are observed as being desirous and instrumental in empowering their loved ones to achieve success.

Key words: illusion, enchantment, pragmatism.

INTRODUCTION

Indian fiction in English plays a significant role in Literature. Emphasising this thought is Dorothy M. Spencer who considers Indian fiction in English as, “a major source for a systematic study of culture – contact and cultural change, with Indian world view – view as the focus for the Westerners to increase their knowledge of acculturation processes” (211).

‘Identity’ and ‘Space’ are priceless words to every individual. The invasion of either results in oppression, depression or suppression. Diasporics are more susceptible and it is pragmatic resilience that empowers them to defend themselves. Foucault affirms the significance of space as:

The space in which we live, which draws us ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that

delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another (23).

The undercurrent endorsing pragmatism is desire and sacrifice. Women in the past though pragmatic were often silenced due to prominent patriarchal values. However, the women characters of Divakaruni, as quoted by Rebecca Solnit in her collection of essays, *Men Explain Things To Me*, “struggle with the forces that would tell her story for her or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law”. They emerge victorious as Divakaruni provides them a platform to narrate their side of the story vociferously. It is to these silenced voices that Divakaruni gives life to. She gives meaning to the unspoken word.

The novels chosen for analysis are, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions*. The word ‘enchantment’ and ‘illusion’ is synonymous to the migrant’s journey and a revelation of the purpose of migration. For an immigrant, the host land is an enchanted forest, a forest of desires, dreams, hope, aspiration, fear, anxiety, alienation, diasporic sensibility concomitantly sandwiched with sacrifice.

Embarking on the journey, the migrant soon realises that the journey, of life is in itself an illusion, ‘Maya’. With the dawn of realization, the migrant is forced to make choices, return to the homeland or create an identity through assimilation or acculturation. The response to this complexity defines the identity of an individual, the quintessential factor being sacrifice.

Kunti and Madri were the wives of King Pandu. Cursed driven, Madri and Kunti find refuge in sage Durvasa’s boon. They beget the five Pandava princes, Yudhishthir, Bheem, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadeva. Pandu and Madri’s lack of self-control result in their premature death. Madri’s selfish and sensual desire overrides her duty towards her children. However, Kunti a pragmatic lady, devoted wife and zealous mother, sacrifices her desire for self-immolation, desiring to win back the kingdom for her sons. As a single mother driven by love and purpose, she decides to win back the kingdom for her sons. “For years she struggled, a widow alone and in disfavor” (Divakaruni 64)

Divakaruni craftily epitomises the pragmatic power of love through Kunti who proved to be a mother, friend, philosopher and guide to the Pandavas. As a mother, she constantly reiterated their station as rightful heirs to Hastinapur’s throne. Her camaraderie is showcased when she encourages them in sports. While motherly love encrusted with fear of loss of her sons is revealed at her unwavering decision to sacrifice the nishad woman and her five sons. Her words as mentioned by Sahadev are a reflection of pure motherly love, “Our mother looked us in the eye. I drugged the wine, she said. They’ll feel no pain. As for the sin of killing them, I swear it will not touch you. I take it all on myself. For the safety of my children, I’ll gladly forgo heaven” (Divakaruni 114, 115).

Protective of her sons, she unflinchingly decides to offer Draupadi as the sacrificial bait to Karna. She is a pragmatic lady though biased. She realises that revealing Karna’s parentage to the Pandavas just before the battle of the Great War would have serious repercussions, the loss of inheritance for which she struggled, betrayal of trust and confusion. A victim of past mistakes, she warns her daughter in-law, Draupadi to live with self-content and stay away from the wicked Duryodhan. She also advises her to make amends for the mocking remarks of one of her attendants, “It seems the blind King’s son is also blind! (Divakaruni 173)

Identity change with the phases and events in one life is evident in Kunti's contribution of her prized artefacts, the only memory binding her to king Pandu. Having accomplished her goal in securing the kingdom for her sons, she readily forgives and empathises with King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari. She accompanies them on their final journey, believing that in their grief, they needed her the most.

The great epics, Ramayana and The Mahabharatha reveal that the nature of a person is strengthened in forests. Puranic literature considers forests as being the adobe of gods. In the Rigveda, forest is associated with a goddess called Aranyani. The power of forest life is exquisitely portrayed in the Pandava's survival in the forest, Sita's banishment and successive refuge in sage Valmiki's hermitage.

Analysing Sita's life, the researcher opines that she moves between three phases of forest life which determines her unique pragmatic identity. The first phase revolves around her marital life with Ram in Panchavati forest, the second phase is woven in the Asokha forest in Lanka and the concluding phase in Sage Valmiki's hermitage. Each phase was intricately woven into the tapestry of her life equipping her with prized lessons.

Through her first phase she learns the power of love and duty. She comprehends the power of one's mind and building on inner strength in Lanka and the empowering nature of women as a force to reckon with in Sage Valmiki's hermitage is emphatically expressed in, "I pray that if life tests them as sooner or later life is bound to do – they'll be able to stand steadfast and think carefully using their hearts as well as their heads understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not" (Divakaruni 357).

The lives of Kunti, Sita and Hidimba are exemplars of single mothers. This resonates in today's contemporary world. The setbacks they faced did not deter them in bringing up powerful son / sons with attributes that changed the course of history. The echoes of the past are reminders that "Lives of great men all remind us; we should make our lives sublime and leave our footprints in the sands of time" (25).

All migrant experiences are sequentially stitched into the fabric of life, beginning with a strong desire for migration enveloped with love and ending with self-rediscovery through enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation.

After Ram, Sita and Lakshman begin their journey towards fulfilling their years of exile; Urmila decides to end her worthless life. The existing turmoil is worth reflecting on, she is pushed from the known to the unknown. She is deprived of the company of Lakshman, her husband and Sita her sister. Young at heart and age, she is unacquainted with palace politics. Queen Sunaina shares this concern with Sita as, "Urmila, as you know, is easily excitable" (Divakaruni 45).

Divakaruni, through Urmila speaks to the immigrant awakening their consciousness to accept challenges and transform them into stepping stones of acculturation. With desire comes displacement, Urmila desired to accompany Lakshman and Sita. To her physical eyes, it was an adventurous and promising journey of ecstatic moments.

Deprived and displaced, she invokes, Yama, the god of death to release her from this misery-stricken life. Her conversation opens up avenues in turning a calamity into an opportunity. She moves from an abandoned and displaced identity into fruitful service. She is bestowed with Yoga Nidra, the gift of ephemeral sleep taking on Lakshman's sleep for fourteen years and enabling him to be ever vigilant and

awake, protecting Ram and Sita in the forest. Urmila's boon also enables him to kill Ravan's son as only a person who had not slept could kill him. All desire is not selfish and deceptive. Desire appropriately channelized as portrayed by Urmila turns into a blessing.

Yet another praiseworthy and pragmatic lady is Hidimba, Bheem's forest wife. Although an asura (one of a class of beneficent celestial spirits of early Vedic and Zoroastrian mythology), she captivated Kunti's heart with her sweet demeanor. She is an enigmatic character who had complete self-control and conquered the enemies of anger, greed, and arrogance. The forgotten one, Hidimba's transformational character from humanity to divinity is depicted in her forgiving splurge. She is an uninvited guest at the Rajasuya celebration, nevertheless, she sends her son to fulfill his duties. Though a single mother and Ghatotkacha being her only son, she trains him in life's valuable lessons. She instructs him to pay respects to King Yudhishtir, his father, Bheem and his uncles, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadev. Juxtaposed, he is not guided to pay obeisance to Draupadi, as he was already the king of his tribe.

This difference of opinion gives rise to bitterness between Draupadi and Hidimba. The latter navigates herself around this obstacle and sends her son to protectively assist his father Bheem during the Great War. Hidimba was also a woman driven by desire. Though she married Bheem against the desires of her people. Her love and desire to uplift them is very visible when she gives up the pleasure of accompanying Bheem to Hastinapur.

Her astute identity is befittingly exhibited in her desire to remain queen in her homeland rather than a slave in the host land, The Palace of Illusions woven by the dreams of Draupadi and the Pandavas. This was her second opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of palace life at Indraprastha. Prioritizing duty over pleasure, lordship over subservience, humility over pride, simplicity over extravagance, peace over turmoil, she moves away from this weighty net.

Secrets scaffolds desires. To protect oneself from mockery, individuals resort to secrets. Sita is trained in martial arts as Queen Sunaina senses the need. "I sense that your future's going to be different from that of most princesses, It might take you to dangerous places where you'll need to defend yourself" (Divakaruni 9). She also observes that her daughter possesses magical healing powers and builds the healing house for her. She encourages her children to follow their dreams. She counsels her husband in the affairs of the kingdom in their secret chamber and acts wisely in the presence of his ministers by feigning innocence and silence.

Although she does not believe in myths and shares in the royal duties of the kingdom with her husband. For the sake of peace, and to ensure the stability of the kingdom she eagerly sought to get her daughters married before the royal elephant was sent out to choose an appropriate male heir to the throne, with 24 auspicious signs on his body.

Queen Sunaina advised her daughters with the recipe for a successful woman, "If you want to stand up against wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride" (Divakaruni 46). Migrant mothers can gain inspiration from Queen Sunaina. She creates a unique identity for herself and empowers her daughter's too. After marriage as they departed from Mithila, the words of wisdom she dispenses, upholds Sita and Urmila in lives trajectory, "We come into the world alone. And in between too, if it is destined, will be alone. Draw on your inner strength, Remember, you can be your own worst enemy or your best friend. It's up to you. And also, this: what you can't change, you must endure"

(Divakaruni 54). She exemplified the words of wisdom that she dispensed. Additionally, the success of Queen Sunaina's life was the exceptional support she received from her husband, King Janak. Although her family was a fore shadow of today's nuclear families, she prepared her daughters to accept and adjust themselves to the joint family systems in Ayodhya.

The silent secret ruler of Mithila was Queen Sunaina who balanced kindness with justice, intelligence and foresighted vision. She was king Janak's counselor and precariously balanced her duties as queen, wife and mother. Despite the ability to have lavish meals, she ensured that the food served was always simple, rice cooked with ghee, lentils and vegetables. The importance of familial relationships is befittingly displayed when she prepares a milk dessert for her future sons in – law. Family upbringing and familial relationships play a vital role in developing the character of an individual. Divakaruni through the characters analysed reinforces the need of pragmatism and pragmatic behaviour. It is vital therefore that the women of today retrace their roots and endorse the spirit of a renewed mind, shattering myths and stereotypes, balancing duty with love.

Reminiscing Yudhisthir's philosophical answers to the Yaksha (a local tutelary spirit or earth jinni of India regarded as a patron of wealth and fertility) is the essence of pragmatism for all human beings,

What is more than the grass?

The thoughts that rise in the mind of man.

Who is truly wealthy?

The man to whom the agreeable and the disagreeable, wealth and woe, past and future are the same.

What is the most wondrous thing on earth?

Each day countless humans enter the Temple of Death, yet the ones left behind continue to live as though they were immortal. (Divakaruni 225)

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