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# Becoming *Kṛṣṇā*: Pāncālī's Quest in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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## Abstract

Women autobiographical narratives draw on the centrality of the female experience in light of the politics of representation. This paper explores that experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel. The study however, does not resort to standardised models of interpreting and analysing the female self, namely feminist criticism. It brings in Orientalism as a tool for interrogating that experience, primarily because the theoretical model of Orientalism supports the analysis of how the female self is created by a patriarchal hegemony and maintained through tradition. The study concentrates on the story of Pāncālī, the female protagonist of the Indian epic Mahābhārata as it is divulged in the novel. Pāncālī's vision of herself and the world she inhabits is restricted by an orientalist culture that operates at the level of the nation as well as the domestic. The palaces she inhabits become more than just architectural edifices; they become embodiments of the motifs of a nationalist culture vitiated with orientalist concerns of cognitive dominance. Pāncālī's efforts to break the shackles of tradition within the home and without it require her to counter such discourse with an entirely new aesthetic of narration and experience, one that is intimately connected to her 'self.' Her futile efforts to construct a grandiose palace as a retributive symbol and her inadequacy at understanding the strength of the female self finally lead her to a self-sufficient, self-engaged rhetoric of completion.

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, Pāncālī, Kṛṣṇā, Quest, Identity*

Krishna touches my hand...I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali [...] Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere.  
(Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 360)

When she wanted her tryst with history, Pāncālī, the daughter of King Drupada, born out of a sacrificial *Yjña* along with her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna, never imagined that she would be the cause of a great Indian civil war, Mahābhārata. She was the fruit of vengeance; Drupada's fury to consume his adversary Droṇācārya. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* concentrates on this story. In the novel Pāncālī, the protagonist, narrates the story of her life, a story of her quest to find out who she is.

Her quest begins, unknowingly, at a very young age, when she muses on her father's palace: "Through the long lonely years of my childhood, when my father's palace seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe, I would go to my nurse and ask for a story" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 1). The first lines prepare the reader for the centrality of space in Pāncālī's life as it develops into a search for her own palace, a space she can call her own. It becomes the ruling factor in her life. Of course this search, as we shall witness, is the fundamental

search for womanhood, born and bred in hegemonic patriarchy. In Pāncālī's case, it is also an assessment of the tensions between how women see and are seen, judge and are judged, a search to carve out a space of their own; of *their* ("emph. Showalter's") wilderness<sup>1</sup> (Showalter 345). Pāncālī goes on to comment: "I hated the thick gray slabs of the walls—more suited to a fortress than a king's residence...I hated the narrow windows, the mean, dimly lit corridors, the uneven floors that were always damp, the massive severe furniture from generations ago that was sized more for giants than men. I hated most of all that the grounds had neither trees nor flowers" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 6).

This description of Drupada's palace unfolds key points about patriarchal hegemony in the narrative. Drupada is consumed by his acrid desire for revenge, which consummates in Pāncālī's birth. She is, thus, from her inception, a child of a nationalist power struggle. Drupada's palace and all ensuing palaces that Pāncālī inhabits become representations of this struggle. The aesthetics of the palaces become important because "any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer" (Said 272). We argue, therefore, that the politics of the discourse of women as the Other (physiological, societal, cultural, ontological and intellectual) and consequent representations of that otherness emerge from the micro-level of the domestic and gradually seep into the outside. We also contend that the domestic is the site where the identities of womanhood are constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed regularly. For women like Pāncālī, then, constructing her subjectivity, her identity, happens in the twilight zone: between the accepted discourse and her *own* sensitivities; between nature and nurture; between the self and its other.

Understanding the female experience, as we intend to do, in that light, becomes increasingly difficult and it is essential that due attention is given to *how* and *why* such perspectival categories are formed and maintained. This is where we deviate from traditional feminist critiques by bringing in Orientalism (as theorised by Edward Said) to form the theoretical framework of our study. According to Said, the Orient (thus the Oriental) was formed as a special category because it was defined and delimited by a set of knowledge-systems disseminated through culture. Interestingly, a similar socio-cultural delimitation is traceable for another specific category: woman. In his book Said writes, "So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the [...] imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient" (Said 26). Something similar happens in case of women. Traditionalist, nationalist hegemony, as in the concerned text, solidifies mythical representations about women, which percolate the domestic where they are regularly played out. Said writes, "[...] knowledge—no matter how special—is regulated first by the local concerns of a specialist, later by the general concerns of a social system of authority. The interplay between local and central interests is intricate, but by no means indiscriminate" (Said 44-45).

In the text Drupada's palace re-presents the dynamics which drive his nationalist agenda. It is an orientalist vision of clutching onto tradition, and thus worn out furniture adding to the severity of the palace. The primary point of concern here is that the woman protagonist's perspective is restricted (the narrow windows in the palace); then again that is precisely what Orientalism is, a narrowing of perspective for the Other, a fixation on things, which in Drupada's

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<sup>1</sup> As we shall see the quest of Pāncālī is precisely for the 'wilderness' that Showalter speaks about. It is not just a search for space outside, in the world of men, but also for space within. It is simultaneously a search for physical and a psychological space, a material and a spiritual space. What this search finally consummates into is called *Kṛṣṇā* in our study.

case is his vengeance. For the Other, Pāncālī, however, such distinctions are worrisome. They are deliberating and didactic in nature, all the while concocting a secret nationalist agenda into which she is thrust eventually.

When her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna tells her about the Droṇācārya – Drupada story in the palace and puts aside her questions as, “You’re looking at the story through the wrong window” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 15), the window becomes symbolic of a perspective of life. Just as Pāncālī is bound by narrow windows in space, her imagination is governed in the development of taste (artistic and textual) as women ought to be governed by patriarchal angles of morality and order. This, in essence, is Orientalism; standing guard for the Other and managing the Other’s viewpoint, since it “is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things” (Said 59). Indeed, Pāncālī is a threat to ‘established view of things’, simply because she interrogates them. She thus, needs governance, for the woman ought to be taught how and where to look. Even more interestingly Dhṛṣṭadyumna falls prey to the tradition he inherits from his father, Drupada. This recognizes the internal consistency of a thought-system that is impinged at the core of the civil society, for clearly, “Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine” (Said 42). When Pāncālī is asked to look through the *correct* window, it becomes a question of ‘colonising the mind’. It also significantly limits thought which is trapped in the nationalist design, like that of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who is bound by a prescribed, cryogenic, neurotic predisposition.

Pāncālī’s presence in Drupada’s palace may be seen in entirely political and ideological terms where discourses of power enmesh her. Simultaneously she is confined by the destiny which is programmed for her. During her visit to the great sage Vyāsa<sup>2</sup>, he advises her: “Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you’re shamed as you’d never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. Maybe it will mitigate the catastrophes to come” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 40).

Pāncālī’s desired action is not related to an exercise of agency but rather withholding agency. In all three instances she is asked to hold back. The point is that the catastrophes Vyāsa speaks of, could possibly be avoided if Pāncālī restricts her natural instincts, for the actions of ‘question’, ‘laughter’ and ‘curse’ are acts of rebellion, which are disallowed for her, a woman. For “any deviation from what were considered the norms of Oriental behaviour was believed to be unnatural” (Said 39). Thus, to encounter ‘dangerous moments’ means, for the woman, to go into a defensive to avoid imminent destruction. Even when she is embarrassed publicly (as Pāncālī would be, later in the narrative) she must not speak *up*, in fear of the politics of the nation going astray, for there is in nationalist, male hegemony “the motif of the Orient as insinuating danger” (Said 57). Pāncālī, thus, can never be ‘allowed’ to speak her mind or do what she wants, because that counteracts the nationalist orientalist paradigm.

A case in point is when Pāncālī asks Vyāsa: “What are you writing?” He answers: “The story of your life, if only you’d stop interrupting it” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 41). The orientalist outline is clear once more. Vyāsa could write Pāncālī’s story because he had access to

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<sup>2</sup> Vyāsa (Vyasa in the text) is a great sage who is both the composer of the epic Mahābhārata and a character in it, and here in the narrative. At this stage in the narrative Vyāsa is composing the story as it unfolds and advises Pāncālī regarding the events to come.

such knowledge. ‘To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”[...] since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* (“emph. Said’s”) we know it” (Said 32). The apparent weirdness of the idea of writing somebody’s narrative before the lived experience fits perfectly in the orientalist pattern, since Orientalism, as an enterprise, rests upon representing the Other without recourse to the Other at all. This happens because “Orientalism imposed limits upon thought about the Orient” (Said 43). Any writer, in this case Vyāsa, because he belonged to the tradition of Orientalism, was unable to relinquish its dominating structure. Pāncālī inquires about this and asks: “How could such a book be written before I’d lived the incidents it described?” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 43). The answer is it ‘could’ be written because that is the way in which orientalist knowledge works. As Said writes: “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* (“emph. Said’s”) the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (Said 40). In quite the same way women can be represented, their destinies mandated and their experiences textualised without them having any role to play in it at all. Pāncālī’s life could be textualised because it was made possible by a tradition of hegemonic ascendancy over women. Furthermore, (and this more important) this dominance is legitimised by a conceptual field in which such representations operate. This is the area corpus of Latent Orientalism: the sub-conscious terrain of thought that administers behaviour of the orientalist, the subject.

Continuing her reflections, Pāncālī states how Drupada considers trees and flowers hazardous to security, obscuring the vision of the sentries, and thus, had removed them. She says:

When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of colour and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmynes, and in the midst of it –but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take. Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel-studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would be finally at home. (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 7)

For Pāncālī the aesthetics of her imagined palace would be totally different from her father’s. She is conscious that her palace could not conform to male norms of representation. Most importantly, it would mirror her ‘self’. It would be the answer to her quest. While in Drupada’s palace Pāncālī thinks of herself, what she desires, who she is. She thinks of her names, Pāncālī (princes of Pāncāl) and Draupadī (daughter of Drupada). She understands that all that she *is* does not include her ‘self’ but others. She, thus, likes the name *Kṛṣṇā* given to her by her friend and guide, Kṛṣṇa. When she gets her chance to make her palace, that inmost being would find expression, and it would happen soon. The image of the palace is justifiably representative of the self and nature of its maker. What it represents is a question we will take up later. But, evidently, for the woman, the problem of choice is not merely a political one, but an intellectual one as well; and that falls directly in the purview of Orientalism. For Pāncālī it, thus, becomes a question of becoming *Kṛṣṇā*. At this juncture let us demarcate the thematic and the problematic in our study.

The problematic in our study is similar to Orientalism. That is to say that the object in our study is still the oriental, who maintains the essentialist character portrayed in the Orientalist discourse. But, this oriental is *also* a woman. This for her is a double-bind situation. While she plays the part of an oriental, she simultaneously takes on her role as a woman, which complicates matters further.

At the thematic level however, our study deviates from the paradigm based on an essential difference between the Orient and the Occident—generated, mitigated and maintained through

culture—which is used to define a seemingly transcendent analysing subject and a fixed object. This is because while the Orient (or the Oriental) in Orientalism was deprived of the agency to represent, the women in our study question their procedural objectification. In other words they interrogate the female experience, which can only be comprehended, in its entirety, in terms of a greater network of ideas that govern that experience, analogous to 'latent' and 'manifest' Orientalism, whereby the former is a collective of rules shared by a community of subjects at the subconscious level (passed down through tradition) and the latter is the resultant action emanating from it.

After her marriage to the Pāṇḍavas and shifting to Hastināpur after a few ordeals, Bhīṣma urges the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra to confer land and territory to the Pāṇḍavas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra schemingly hands over Khāṇḍavprastha to them, a salt-laden wasteland. Arjuna in an offer to Agnī<sup>3</sup> burns down the forest but saves Māyā who is a fabulous rākṣasā<sup>4</sup> architect. The Pāṇḍavas ask him to construct a palace and this is when Pāncālī gives him instructions about the palace she wants: the Palace of Illusions. Constructed by Māyā it questions the fundamental tenets of male hegemonic architecture. The palace shows that spaces can be dynamic and challenging rather than static—thus painted windows, floors which resemble pools of water and real pools which look like floors. Also, unlike Drupada's palace and the one in Hastināpur, there is no gigantic old furniture in the palace. It is created, not inherited and hence it is free from the burdens of history. This is the crucial moment in the narrative when Pāncālī begins to chart her own space within the orientalist plan. The pattern followed in the orientalist politics of representation is thematically exactly the same as the one followed in case of representing women and womanhood; because “It is possible to give many instances of how the rule of colonial difference—of representing the “other” as inferior and radically different, and hence incorrigibly inferior—can be employed in situations that are not, in the strict terms of political history colonial” (Chatterjee 33). Women's lack of space and of their own narratology is explored through various dimensions in the academia. The organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience (Soja 79). Spatial order is one of the most striking means by which we recognise the existence of *cultural* differences[...] that is, differences in the ways in which members of those societies live out and reproduce their social existence (Hillier et. al. 79). Consequently, the assertion of a cultural space and by extension a 'sexuated' space is an expression of cultural, sexual and gender distinctions. The discourse on women comes in here, for in the male narratives and historiographies women assume the role of the Other, the Oriental: their lives shaped by and appropriated into a generic, monolithic, orientalist agenda. And as it so happens that “It is men (the norm) who in the representational system stand for both men (the “Same”) and women (the “Other”)” (Ivekovic 18). The woman, because she is 'the represented', has to give in to the definitions and interpretations of *her-self* by the subject. And “Thus one can say that man = man *and* (“emph. Ivekovic's”) woman” (Ivekovic 18).

Challenging such meta-narratives requires, on women's part (like Pāncālī), expressing “the themes, attitudes and perceptions [...] which [...] are linked to their life experience and role standards” (Sheppard 122-136). For the woman then composing narrative history is not just a question of doing things differently but *doing to create a difference*: the way the female identity is represented *in* the narrative and is *made* by it. The autobiography then becomes the “obvious material for studying the emergence of “modern” forms of self-representation” (Chatterjee 127). It

<sup>3</sup>God of fire in Indian mythology.

<sup>4</sup> A rākṣasā is mythical demon in Indian mythology. They were capable of great magic and craftsmanship. In this part of the narrative Arjuna rescues the rākṣasā, Māyā, from the forest fire and then asks him to build them their new palace.

disowns the male fundamentalist, orientalist representation of history as narrative: in which women emerge only in a contributory role of the Other. *The Palace of Illusions*, thus, is a fertile ground for analysing the strength of narratives in lives of women, more so when construed by them, like Pāncālī does. “Narrative [...] introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision [...]” (Said, 240). In metanarratives women, like Pāncālī, are rendered fixity beyond their control. They are given a singular identity that holds the Orientalist project at a permanent status quo. Said writes, “...we can quite easily substitute “Oriental” for “Chinese” ...” (Said 254). Substitution is possible because the word ‘Oriental’ does not correspond to a particular demographic; it slots in every Other into the same discursive field. This is because as easily as we can put ‘Chinese’ in place of ‘Oriental’, we can also put Arab or Indian. ‘Oriental’ then, is not a category but a symbol, of different realities, put under a banner that advertises the nature of the object: unchanging and unmoving. In this study, the Orient(al) can effectively be substituted by woman, since it serves as a symbol. Orientalism, thus, follows an aesthetic of narration and of creating the Other. It consequently inscribes its characteristics, symbolically, in the institutions it forms to hold the narratives in place: the palaces in the text. For the woman interrogating this process of vilification requires an understanding and negation of the male structures of subjugation and simultaneously imbibing a process of textualising/sexualising their identities. The female search for a narrative is a search for an aesthetic that projects their selves, their perspectives. A perspective is a symbol, a representation, an image, a text. That which represents something *is* that thing. Reclamation of a sexuuated space is thus, the search for and into *Kṛ̥ṣṇā*: a state of pure, unmitigated consciousness and of being.

Pāncālī’s creation offers her an apparent or illusory power (hence the Palace of Illusions). Her palace still embodies several male nationalist underpinnings that regulate her existence. There is a strict segregation maintained in the palace on matters of the state. Pāncālī says,

“I had a good eye for matters of governance. More and more, Yudhisthir began to ask my advice when a tricky judgment had to be delivered. And I, having learned more of the working’s of women’s power, was careful to offer my opinion only in private, deferring to him always in front of others” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 148).

The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* (“emph. Said’s”) and *represented* (“emph. Said’s”) by dominating frameworks (Said 40). Even in her own palace Pāncālī’s administrative acumen is disavowed. Pāncālī understands the way women deal with the power of agency, that their opinion needs to be ‘contained’ in traditional, male structures; and that there *exists* (as a truism)—and should be maintained— a certain demarcation between the public and the private when it comes to women dealing with matters of nationalism. Their voices need to be kept within the walls of domesticity, while at the same time being represented in the outside by the man.

Orientalist hegemony demands that the Other be relieved of authority. Hence, the Palace of Illusions faces imminent threat from the likes of Duryodhan “who rode in triumph to the Palace of Illusions to take possession of it. When they came within sight of the palace, Duryodhan released his pent-up breath. *Mine, finally!* His retainers realized then that all he’d done to the Pandavas had been for this—to own the palace he had failed to replicate, the site of his past humiliation, his present triumph. To rewrite his history” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 197). Riding to possess Pāncālī’s palace is not merely an exercise of power, it is a statement of nationalist ideology: all that signifies the strength of womanhood be controlled by patriarchal agencies. Duryodhan does not ride to destroy the palace but to take possession of it. He does not ride to re-write *his* history, even if he imagines it, but to re-write Pāncālī’s. For the Orientalist “the Orientals he studied became in fact *his* (“emph. Said’s”) Orientals, for he saw them not only as

actual people but as monumentalized objects in his account of them” (Said 233). A careful analogy to the word ‘his’ in the extract is the word ‘mine’ exclaimed by Duryodhan. The word “his” implicates authority and possession of the Oriental / the Other. Similarly, Pāncālī is possessed in body and soul, because she is not perceived as woman but as an ‘object’ of observation and usurpation. Nationalist hegemony, which we can very well call Orientalist Nationalism, works on procedural alienation and capture, where an entity, in this case women are *made* alien and then possessed. Their being ‘made’ alien is possible because of an ontological separation between the home and the outside, the physical and the spiritual, the political domain of the nation and the seemingly apolitical sphere of the home, which is advertised as the domain of the woman, while being vitiated with ‘male(volent)’ political concerns.

Duryodhan, however, is not able to ‘take’ Pāncālī’s palace; it self-destructs. A crucial moment arrives when the Pāṇḍavas and Pāncālī return to Hastināpur. Pāncālī’s dire strait, however, does not end. She is humiliated and stripped in court, in front of her husbands. At this narrative juncture she says:

“They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn’t think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day...I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 195).

Pāncālī’s transition in the orientalist nationalist hegemony is complete. She is metamorphosed from a child of vengeance to an object of nationalism. She can be gambled away for reasons of polity, and where the inner (supposedly holy) sanctum of the home can be abused in the name of power. Said writes, “Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province [...] it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders” (Said 207). The same is true in case of Pāncālī. Failure to possess Pāncālī’s palace results in seizing ‘her’, her sexuality publicly, for that is the ultimate male orientalist projection of power. It is not that men *could* do it to women, but that culture is vitiated with this notion: that in order to control a woman, one needs to control her sexuality; and in doing so orientalist hegemony sexuates both the woman and itself. Since the hegemonic culture holds the agency to represent the woman, it ensures the mode of retaining her identity, as it feels right. Thus, the Pāṇḍavas would avenge Pāncālī when it suits ‘their’ nationalist concerns. Since the woman cannot avenge herself, the onus falls on the male to do it *for* her. The woman is unable to launch a counter-offensive, because she is fixated spacio-temporally. She is fixed and unchanging, static and inarticulate and her problems can only be voiced by the patriarchy that signifies a woman’s position both in the outside world of political affairs and in the inside sphere of the domestic. And therefore, for Pāncālī, the need arises to protect herself from her husbands as well. This is a primal point in our study, something which was pointed out earlier as well; that the orientalist hegemony of nationalism propels its project in the domestic domain as much as in the outward arena of socio-politics, and that women are, like Pāncālī, subjugated in the process, by being rendered an eternal fixation.

Pāncālī’s narrative brings us to an interesting juncture. She now understands the orientalist motifs in the nationalist schema that dominates her entire existence and starts ‘interrogating’ the sexuuated biases involved in the same. She is surprised at the illogical *kṣatriya* code of honour and duty by which the males she happens to know are bound. She tries to come out of her way to counter such orientalist predilections. The palace is not named after Pāṇḍu, the dead father of the Pāṇḍavas, or after any God or Deva. It is named after Illusions (Māyā), the architect and thus [...] provides a value system that accompanies a new socialist order (Sochen 5)



emerging, which later culminates in Pāncālī's role in forming minor trial courts for women, providing ruler ship assistance to Yudhiṣṭir amongst other things. Furthermore, Pāncālī does not name the palace after herself, even when she could have. This reflects Virginia Woolf's idea that female anonymity articulates female virtue against the masculine tendency to put one's name on everything.

Pāncālī's plan to etch her name in history runs counterintuitive to her expectations. This is because Pāncālī designs her palace on the masculine foundations of pride and envy, of making a mark in the world and not on her own terms:

"I smiled with sudden elation, thinking, this is what I've been waiting for all my life! ... This creation that's going to be the envy of every King of Bharat—we'll call it the Palace of Illusions" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 146).

Naturally the envy she arouses in the hearts of other kings is what leads to the ruin of the palace. Māyā, the chief architect of the palace, warns her not to invite anyone to her palace, but masculine demands within her to show her superior edifice to others makes her act otherwise. Naturally the palace is constantly threatened and eventually succumbs to Duryodhan's attack.

This is a crucial point in the narrative because henceforth there is a change in Pāncālī's aesthetic and narrative sensibilities. She does not want to hit back at history with a better palace grander than the earlier one though she often dreams of it. She understands the futility of such an exercise. The palace dissolves into thin air, and what remain are bone, hair, sand and salt. Sand and salt were a part of Khāṇḍavprastha which was an arid land. But bone and hair are human parts. Māyā may have used them to construct the palace but these are parts of Pāncālī herself which are destroyed along with her palace. It is the male part within her that is destroyed. The palace ironically comes alive at the moment of its death. From here Pāncālī moves into 'her' wilderness without the male ego-centeredness that drove her. She understands that in order to interrogate the orientalist doctrine of nationalism she needs to distance herself from it. This is because representations of women/womanhood carry seeds of representation of man/manhood. In time, these representations, circulated as infallible knowledge systems, become normal, traditional. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, "The only way I can see myself making definitions is in a provisional and polemical one: I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. 'Man' is such a word in common usage. Not *a* ("emph. Spivak's") word, but *the* ("emph. Spivak's") word" (Spivak 495).

Statements which Pāncālī makes after these events are very different from what she had earlier modelled herself into. From here Pāncālī moves towards a self-sufficient narratology which expresses her need and concerns far better than what she has done so far by tending to masculine norms. She does not depend on her husbands any more, in fact Sage Vyāsa remarks much later when he says: "I've always known you to be stronger than your husbands" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 329). Pāncālī by her destiny and her *karma*<sup>5</sup> had ventured into a territory which was available to men but not to women of her time. She was married to five husbands and leading a conjugal life with all five of them. She is an object of awe and admiration for other women. However, five husbands are not able to offer her the peace or solace which her soul wants.

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<sup>5</sup> As a concept *karma* has quite a few meanings. Firstly it means causality, that every action has an opposing reaction. Secondly, it is a way of moralization of actions and thirdly, it is connected to the idea of rebirth. In Pāncālī's case all three ideas converge. Pāncālī's actions to work on male identified norms have the opposing reaction, counter intuitively. Her actions henceforth are based on her own moral ideas that she identifies herself with. Also, from this realisation she moves towards a psychological rebirth, transcendence from the material to the spiritual.

Politically too, after the great war, Pāncālī moves towards the establishment of a female domain in the public sphere when she says:

“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” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 323).

She does so with help from Kuntī, Gāndhārī and Uttarā, people she would not have relied on earlier. Not only this, earlier we find that in her palace though she offered legal counsel to Yudhiṣṭir she chose to stay in the background. But now, she comes forward to form a women's court which meets with grand success as “Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 325). With many young men dead in Hastināpur as a result of the war, women have to fend for a living. The destabilization and subversion of social structures gives way to altered forms of social contact between men and women, and therefore creates a space which is different from the old Hastināpur. The city, under Pāncālī's efforts, moves towards a process of de-orientalist, de-nationalist discourse by actions of the women who inhabit public spaces.

Towards the closing of the text we arrive at a decisive moment when Pāncālī says:

“Krishna touches my hand...I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for Karna—how surprisingly solid his clasp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 360).

Her narrative sensibilities converge at this point. She feels free to hold the hands of the two men she really wanted in life, namely Kṛṣṇa and Karṇa and the moment she alters this textual boundary of her life the palace which she had craved all her life awaits her. ‘The walls are space, the floor is sky and the center everywhere’ is something which was not possible by masculine standards of architecture on earth. The modernist female perspective with its ‘center everywhere’ makes it unique and wonderful.

The narrative model of Pāncālī's sensibilities may thus be traced as one where the woman questions her segregation and marginality in the affairs of men and claims her rightful place—in the spatial domain and in the text, but in masculine terms of power and authority. Here the sense of identity with the self is produced in opposition to the illogical *kṣatriya* code about women in the home and the way in which family life is lived. The next step is realizing the insufficiency of the male model (because the discourse of family and home becomes destabilized soon) and the final step is moving towards a female spatio-natology; self-sufficient and independent of the tenets of the male domain. The sense of her ‘self’ is reconciled with being a woman and delighting in it rather than experiencing it in oppositional terms.

The occupation here is reconstructing a pure female identity. Pāncālī's palace of illusions is also after all a palace. So, initially she rebels against what she perceives to be male spatial architecture but does so in terms which are set by the men themselves: she wants to make a better palace. Similarly, in the text of her life, though initially she nurtures a desire to do something other than follow the blind *kṣatriya* code of honour and revenge followed by her father and her husbands, she rebels in those exact terms, as only war will satisfy her outraged modesty, her slandered honour. She goes against the system, to be recognised by the system. She inquires previously, innocently: “And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men?” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 26). But unmitigated catastrophes ensure that she herself becomes the reason for the biggest war in Indian mythology where brothers bay for each other's blood. Finally she uncovers the power of the woman and upon

realising it is not even afraid of death: “I wait for fear to scrape my spine with its frozen nail, but it surprises me by its absence” (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* 359). Embracing her ‘self’ in purely reconciliatory and not oppositional terms makes her a very courageous woman, who interrogates the process of history and thus, leaves an indelible mark on it. Thus Pāncālī’s palace tells us that there is a distinctive female narrative-structural practice and the interconnectedness of space and narrative helps in uncovering the woman’s story that lies between men’s exploits: her life, her voice, her questions and her vision.

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