

RESEARCH ARTICLE**THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The Mahabharat and the Ramayana are two of the finest epics in Indian culture, and they guide people to live righteously. These epics are told from a masculine perspective, with the man as the central figure. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a female-centric rendition of the epic *The Mahabharat*. Draupadi is the voice that depicts the epic from her perspective, including her life, sacrifices, pain, and difficulties in a patriarchal society. This paper examines the novel *The Palace of Illusions* from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Indian Culture, Female-centric, Masculine perspective, Patriarchal society.

Introduction

One of the greatest epics in Indian culture, *The Mahabharata* has been translated, recounted, and altered by numerous authors. However, the majority of these books focus on the male viewpoint and their heroic sacrifices and actions, ignoring the female characters. *The Palace of Illusions* brings us to the world of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, a time that is part myth, part history, and entirely wonderful. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel narrator and central character, Panchali, wife of the legendary five Pandava brothers, offers a unique feminist reworking of an epic.

About the Author

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known Indian-American author, poet, activist, and professor of creative writing at the University of Houston and also an activist for women's rights, especially for immigrant communities. She is known for an extensive body of work that encompasses novels, poems, short stories, and young adult fiction. She is best known for novels—*The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Palace of Illusions*. In her writing, she draws inspiration from Indian mythology and history and mingles it with contemporary issues of women.

Feminist Perspective within the Novel

The Palace of Illusions beautifully weaves the story of *The Mahabharata* epic and the struggles, sacrifices, and hardships of women across time. Draupadi is the central character through whom we are able to see her opinions, feelings, and thoughts on the events that unfold in the future. In the novel, she is a strong character from the start who questions each and every discrimination she faces, starting with her name—Draupadi.

"But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history?" (05)

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We witness the discrimination she faced from birth. She is an unwelcome guest. King Drupad prayed for a boy child to avenge Drona, and though he received Dhristadyumna as well as Draupadi, he hesitated to accept her equally. Draupadi keenly observes this difference.

"I didn't forget that hesitation... Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn't trust him completely." (06)

Because of this rejection, the bond between Draupadi and her father remains weak. She is forced to learn only feminine traits and is confined within the palace, which she describes as more of a fortress than a home.

"I hated the thick gray slabs of the walls—more suited to a fortress than a king's residence..." (06)

Colour discrimination is another major issue addressed. Dark-skinned women face severe prejudice in Indian society, and Draupadi experiences the same.

"In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues..." (08)

Patriarchal culture prescribes strict roles for men and women. Women are expected to support men, whereas men escape responsibilities. Draupadi boldly questions this norm.

"And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (26)

Patriarchal society uses religion, customs, and rules to oppress women. Draupadi questions the idea that women do not have a rightful place in heaven.

"Good women would surely go to one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands." (156)

The novel also exposes the objectification of women when Draupadi is gambled away by the Pandavas.

"The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave." (190)

Another major theme is Draupadi's quest for identity—princess, wife, mother, queen, or Panchali?

"None of them were the true Panchaali. If not, who was I?" (229)

Despite all hardships, Draupadi emerges as a strong woman who rejects societal boundaries.

"Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women." (343)

Conclusion

One could argue that Chitra's *The Palace of Illusions* is a feminist book. Without changing the epic's primary plot, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni employs the mythological figure of Draupadi to represent contemporary women and their hardships, prejudice, and sacrifices in patriarchal society, making the book relevant today.

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