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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-Imagining the Mahabharata: Gender, Identity, and Human Realities in S. L.Bhyrappa's *Parva* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract
The Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics of Indian literature, has inspired numerous literary reinterpretations across generations. Contemporary Indian novelists have revisited this ancient narrative to explore its characters, conflicts, and philosophical dimensions through modern perspectives. S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offer two significant reinterpretations of the epic, challenging conventional understandings of mythology, gender, identity, and human existence. While Bhyrappa reconstructs the Mahabharata through a rationalistic, historical, and psychological approach, Divakaruni retells the epic through the first-person perspective of Draupadi, foregrounding female consciousness and emotional experience. Despite their differences in narrative technique, both novels question established traditions and humanize the legendary characters of the epic. This article examines how the two authors reimagine the Mahabharata by exploring gender identity, patriarchal structures, caste discrimination, power relations, moral ambiguity, personal desires, and the consequences of war. Through a comparative analysis, the study demonstrates how these modern retellings transform an ancient epic into a meaningful exploration of contemporary human realities.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Reinterpretation, Gender Identity, Feminism, Patriarchy, Humanism, Caste, Dharma, Mythology, Contemporary Indian Fiction.

Introduction

Indian literature has consistently drawn inspiration from its ancient epics, particularly the Mahabharata, which remains one of the most influential narratives in Indian cultural and literary traditions. Its complex characters, philosophical reflections, moral dilemmas, and representations of human relationships have provided opportunities for reinterpretation across different periods. Although the traditional epic presents a vast narrative dominated by royal families, warriors, political conflicts, and divine interventions, contemporary writers have increasingly explored the untold experiences and psychological dimensions of its characters.

S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* represent two distinctive approaches to reimagining the Mahabharata. First published in Kannada in 1979, *Parva* reconstructs the epic as a human and historical narrative by reducing its supernatural elements and emphasizing psychological, political, and social realities. In contrast, *The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008, retells the epic through Draupadi's perspective, giving prominence to her emotions, desires, struggles, and individual identity.

Although the novels differ in narrative structure and literary approach, both challenge conventional interpretations of the epic. Bhyrappa questions the divine and heroic dimensions of traditional mythology, while Divakaruni challenges the male-centred narrative by placing a woman's experiences at the centre of the story. Together, the novels demonstrate that the Mahabharata is not merely a story of war and heroism but also a complex exploration of human relationships, social inequalities, gender expectations, and moral conflicts.This article examines the similarities and differences between the two novels, focusing on their representations of gender, identity, power, caste, morality, and the human consequences of conflict.

From Mythological Tradition to Human Experience

One of the major similarities between *Parva* and *The Palace of Illusions* is their attempt to move beyond conventional mythological interpretations of the Mahabharata. Both authors reinterpret familiar events and characters through perspectives that emphasize human emotions and psychological experiences.In *Parva*, Bhyrappa adopts a rationalistic approach to the epic. He removes or reinterprets many supernatural elements traditionally associated with the Mahabharata. Divine births, miraculous interventions, and celestial weapons are presented through human explanations and historical possibilities. Krishna, for instance, is portrayed primarily as an intelligent political strategist rather than being presented solely through his divine identity. Similarly, Karna's birth is explored through the social circumstances and emotional consequences surrounding Kunti's early life.Through this approach, Bhyrappa shifts the emphasis from divine destiny to human responsibility. His characters are shaped by social circumstances, personal ambitions, political pressures, and individual decisions.

Divakaruni, on the other hand, retains the mythological framework but transforms its narrative focus. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the familiar events of the Mahabharata are experienced through Draupadi's consciousness. Her birth from the sacrificial fire, her marriage to the five Pandavas, her relationship with Karna, and her humiliation in the royal court are presented through her emotional and psychological responses. Thus, while Bhyrappa humanizes the epic by questioning its supernatural dimensions, Divakaruni humanizes it by exploring the inner life of a woman whose experiences have often been overshadowed by male-centred narratives.Both novels ultimately encourage readers to reconsider the Mahabharata as a narrative of human experience rather than simply accepting it as a fixed mythological account.

Gender Identity and the Position of Women

Gender is one of the most significant areas of comparison between the two novels. Both authors explore the restrictions imposed upon women within patriarchal societies and reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of those restrictions.In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi emerges as an independent, intelligent, and questioning woman. From childhood, she demonstrates curiosity and a desire for knowledge and freedom. She refuses to accept the limitations traditionally imposed upon women and seeks to understand her identity beyond her roles as a daughter, wife, and queen.Her marriage to the five Pandavas becomes a significant source of emotional conflict. Although she attempts to fulfil her responsibilities towards each husband, she experiences loneliness and struggles with her personal desires. Divakaruni presents

Draupadi not simply as a symbol of honour or revenge but as a woman with complex emotions, romantic longings, and individual aspirations.

Her humiliation during the dice game becomes a powerful criticism of patriarchal society. When she is brought into the royal court and treated as an object of ownership, she questions the morality of the elders and the legitimacy of the actions committed against her. Her resistance exposes the injustice of a social system that denies women their dignity and autonomy.Similarly, Bhyrappa gives considerable attention to women's experiences in *Parva*. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Madri, and Subhadra are presented as individuals with their own emotional struggles and perspectives. Their experiences reveal how women are frequently used to establish political alliances, maintain family relationships, and fulfil social expectations.Kunti's life, in particular, reflects the consequences of secrecy, social pressure, and maternal responsibility. Gandhari's decision to blindfold herself can be understood through the complexities of loyalty, protest, and personal suffering.While Divakaruni primarily explores female consciousness through Draupadi's first-person narration, Bhyrappa presents women's experiences through multiple character perspectives. Both approaches reveal the limitations placed upon women and emphasize the importance of recognizing their individuality.

Identity, Caste, and Social Discrimination

The representation of identity and social hierarchy provides another important connection between the novels. Both authors examine how an individual's opportunities and relationships are influenced by birth, social position, and cultural expectations. In *Parva*, Karna becomes a central figure through whom Bhyrappa examines caste discrimination. Although he possesses extraordinary abilities as a warrior, his identity as the son of a charioteer exposes him to humiliation and rejection. His association with Duryodhana is partly shaped by the dignity and recognition that society denies him.Karna's life demonstrates the destructive consequences of a rigid social hierarchy in which an individual's worth is frequently determined by birth rather than ability. His conflict between loyalty, identity, and personal dignity makes him one of the most psychologically complex characters in the novel.

Divakaruni also explores social discrimination through Draupadi's rejection of Karna during the swayamvara. Her decision is influenced by the social identity attributed to him. However, as the narrative progresses, Draupadi experiences curiosity and emotional attraction towards Karna, creating an internal conflict between social expectations and personal feelings.This relationship introduces questions about social prejudice, regret, desire, and the restrictions imposed by established hierarchies.Through Karna and Draupadi, both novels reveal how social identities influence personal relationships and determine an individual's position within society.

Power, Politics, and the Question of Dharma

The Mahabharata is fundamentally a narrative of power, political rivalry, and moral conflict. Both *Parva* and *The Palace of Illusions* reinterpret these elements by examining the relationship between personal ambition, social responsibility, and ethical decision-making.In *Parva*, Bhyrappa presents the conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas as a complex political and familial struggle rather than a simple confrontation between good and evil. The characters are motivated by ambition, jealousy, insecurity, loyalty, and the desire for recognition.The concept of dharma becomes particularly complicated in this context. Yudhishthira's commitment to truth and righteousness does not always produce morally desirable consequences. Bhishma's rigid adherence to his vows contributes to suffering, while Krishna's political strategies raise questions about the relationship between morality and practical necessity.Bhyrappa suggests that dharma is not always an absolute principle but a difficult responsibility shaped by circumstances and human limitations.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, power is explored through Draupadi's position within the royal family and political establishment. Although she becomes a queen and participates in the establishment of the Pandavas' kingdom, her personal autonomy remains restricted by patriarchal expectations.The magnificent palace of Indraprastha symbolizes wealth, ambition, and political achievement. However, its grandeur cannot protect the Pandavas from jealousy, rivalry, and betrayal. The palace therefore becomes a symbol of the instability of power and the deceptive nature of worldly success.Both novels demonstrate that political authority and social status cannot guarantee justice or personal happiness.

Narrative Techniques and Multiple Perspectives

The narrative structures of the two novels reveal their different literary strategies.Divakaruni employs first-person narration in *The Palace of Illusions*, allowing Draupadi to recount the events of the Mahabharata through her own experiences. This narrative technique provides direct access to her thoughts, memories, emotions, and personal interpretations. Readers are encouraged to reconsider familiar events by understanding how they affect a woman who has often remained at the margins of the traditional narrative.Bhyrappa, in contrast, employs a multi-perspective narrative structure in *Parva*. Different characters recount and reflect upon their experiences, producing a polyphonic narrative in which no single voice dominates the entire story. The recollections of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Bhishma, Karna, Krishna, Yudhishthira, and other characters create a complex account of the events leading to the Kurukshetra War. Their memories and interpretations frequently reveal contradictions, emotional biases, and conflicting understandings of truth.While Divakaruni gives central importance to one woman's voice, Bhyrappa creates a narrative space in which multiple voices contribute to the reconstruction of the epic. Both techniques challenge the idea that history and mythology can be understood through a single authoritative perspective.

Love, Desire, and Emotional Conflicts

Beyond political and social concerns, both novels explore the emotional experiences of their characters, particularly the tension between personal desires and social obligations.In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's complicated feelings towards Karna introduce an important emotional dimension to the narrative. Her rejection of him during the swayamvara and her subsequent attraction towards him create a sense of regret and unfulfilled desire. This emotional conflict reveals the distance between personal feelings and the expectations imposed by society.Her relationship with the five Pandavas also reflects the complexities of love, duty, jealousy, and emotional compromise. Draupadi's experiences reveal the difficulty of maintaining individual identity within relationships governed by social and familial responsibilities.In *Parva*, emotional conflicts are explored through several characters. Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana is connected to gratitude and the desire for social recognition. Kunti's relationship with her children is complicated by guilt and secrecy, while Gandhari's life reflects the emotional consequences of loyalty and sacrifice.Bhyrappa's characters frequently experience conflicts between personal feelings and social obligations. Through these experiences, both authors present love and desire as important aspects of human identity rather than secondary elements of an epic narrative.

War, Revenge, and Human Suffering

The Kurukshetra War forms the central tragedy of the Mahabharata and represents another important area of comparison between the two novels.In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi initially views the war as an opportunity to obtain justice for the humiliation she experiences in the royal court. However, as the conflict progresses, she witnesses the destruction of families, relationships, and human lives. The deaths of loved ones transform her understanding of victory and revenge.Although the Pandavas emerge victorious, the outcome

does not provide the happiness or fulfilment that Draupadi initially expects. The emotional cost of war becomes greater than the satisfaction of revenge.Similarly, *Parva* presents the war without glorifying its heroic dimensions. Bhyrappa emphasizes physical suffering, exhaustion, death, psychological trauma, and the destruction of social relationships. The battlefield becomes a place of human suffering rather than merely a setting for heroic achievements.The surviving characters are forced to confront guilt, loss, and the consequences of their decisions.Both authors therefore challenge the glorification of warfare and reveal that victory achieved through widespread destruction cannot be considered an uncomplicated triumph.

A Comparative Feminist and Humanistic Perspective

The most significant contribution of these novels lies in their ability to reinterpret the Mahabharata through perspectives that challenge established literary and cultural assumptions.Divakaruni's approach is primarily feminist in its narrative emphasis. By placing Draupadi at the centre of the story, she challenges the traditional male-dominated representation of the epic. Her narrative gives importance to female agency, emotional independence, gender inequality, and the struggle for individual identity.Bhyrappa's approach is predominantly humanistic and psychological. By reducing supernatural explanations and presenting the characters as ordinary human beings, he examines the social, political, and emotional forces that shape their actions. His treatment of caste, gender, morality, and power encourages readers to question conventional ideas of heroism and righteousness.Despite these differences, both writers share an important literary objective: to recover the human experiences concealed within the familiar narrative of the Mahabharata.Their novels reveal that the epic is not simply a story of divine intervention, heroic battles, and moral certainty. It is also a narrative of individuals struggling against social expectations, personal limitations, injustice, and the consequences of their choices.

Conclusion

S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offer significant modern reinterpretations of the Mahabharata. Although their narrative approaches differ, both novels challenge traditional understandings of the epic and bring attention to its complex human dimensions.Bhyrappa reconstructs the Mahabharata through a rationalistic and psychological framework, emphasizing the realities of caste, political ambition, moral ambiguity, and human suffering. Divakaruni, meanwhile, transforms the epic into a narrative of female consciousness by presenting Draupadi's experiences, emotions, and struggles from her own perspective.Their representations of gender, identity, power, love, social discrimination, and war demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Mahabharata in contemporary literary discourse. While Parva questions the relationship between myth, history, and human responsibility, The Palace of Illusions challenges the marginalization of women within traditional narratives.Ultimately, both novels establish that an epic is not a fixed or unchanging narrative but a literary tradition that can be continuously revisited and reinterpreted. By presenting familiar characters through new perspectives, Bhyrappa and Divakaruni transform the Mahabharata into a reflection of enduring human concerns. Their works encourage readers to move beyond conventional interpretations and recognize the multiple voices, identities, and experiences that constitute the epic.

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