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# Quest for Gender Identity in the Palace of Illusion

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PARINITHA B<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Mythology is the backbone of all cultures and civilizations. The rich heritage of the mythology is the foundation of Indian culture. The epic narrative of the Mahabharata had been written thousands of years ago. However, the incredible story keeps on discovering conspicuousness in each type of craftsmanship and keeps on overpowering us even today. It is as yet venerated not simply because of its wonderful loftiness; however, the profoundly philosophical thoughts that propagate all through the epic show us the craft of living. Being an important text of Indian culture and the stories that we have grown up with hold relevance even during present times. The Mahabharata is not just a story of morality to be narrated from the generations but an unending source of study. Plenty of critics has been studied the text from several perspectives. Still, much remains to be discovered and researched. The paper intends to analyze The Palace of Illusions by Chaitra Banajee Divakaruni, which looks afresh into the stunning character Draupadi of the Mahabharata. The study aims to discover the quest for gender identities and self-crisis in the powerful epic retelling.*

**Keywords:** *mythology, prominence, perpetuate, generation, morality, gender.*

The imagination and thinking power of man enables us to believe that culture and mythology have emerged since the early stages of history. Hence most of the achievements of mankind are based on the mythology and culture of the country. The role of the mythology itself is the cultural identity of the nation. The human world is unimaginable without myths. We will have been lost if we don't have myths, says Faith Berk (Berk, 2016). The heritage of cultural richness has been carried on from generation to generation through the myths. The legends, folktales, fables, myths are the collective consciousness of the nation. Hence, in every stage of the human race, we can see the significance of myths. The cultural identities of any country are associated with its rich heritage of mythology. Hence, all civilizations of the human race have their mythologies. The epics exhibit to us what is the right way to live life is. It explains the actual

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<sup>1</sup> Author is a Research Scholar at College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka & Asst Professor at Dept of English and other Languages, Bharat Mata College of Commerce and Arts, Aluva, Ernakulam, Kerala, India.

meaning of life. Epics are based on established traditions that narrate the deeds of the heroic figure. In India, we have two great epics, Ramayana, written by Valmiki and the Mahabharata, composed by Vedvyasa; both are originally written in Sanskrit. Ramayan narrates the story of Lord Ram, who was sent to exile for 14 years with his wife Sita and younger brother Laxman. It brings out many quintessential principal values which are taught to every child. The Mahabharata is the longest epic that throws upon the politics played and teaches us to pursue the duties assigned to us. They teach us how to become good human beings and the actual importance of relationships in life.

Epic is not just a story to be told and passed on from generation to generation but an interesting and inspirational source of study. It depicts the culture, tradition, and way of life of long-forgotten years. Indian culture is rich and diverse with the timeless epic tales of Ramayana and Mahabharata. They hold a place of special veneration in Indian culture and society. Thousands of years old tales inspired numberless poets, writers, and artists across the globe. Even though plenty of research has been conducted on the great epics, the magnitude and enormity of the texts and the insightful observations about life make it relevant even today. There are plenty of opportunities to look into more introspection, and revisiting will open up new avenues of thought and expression. Though innumerable studies had been conducted on the text, still much remains undisclosed and researched. Mythological representation of the female is not merely a woman of flesh and blood but bold and benevolent. B. Black says, “Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped to shape Indian gender and social norms ever since.” (Balck, 2007). It has proved in the postmodern retelling of the great timeless epic the Mahabharata in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusion*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author, poet, and Professor of Writing at the University of Houston. She writes about women, challenges faced by immigrants, history, myth, family, and hardships of living in a multicultural world. Her novel *The Palace of Illusion* is a deeply moving retelling of the Mahabharata from the Draupadi’s point of view. The writer has made every attempt to bridge the vacuum of tradition and modernity. (Puri, 2015). We all came across the tale of the epic in our life, which is the perspective of men. The front page of the novel stated that it is Panchali’s Mahabharata. Here the author gives us a glimpse into the life of Panchali, a woman who faces challenges right from her birth. In a patriarchal society, a wide canvas of Draupadi’s voice is heard. It is the fire and energy in Draupadi, the spirit to fight injustice and her multifacetedness that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman for all ages. (Nair, 2011). It tells us about her relationship with her twin brother, her

best friend Lord Krishna, her bond with Pandavas, and their mother, Kunti. It explains the role played by women in a world dominated by men. It beautifully exposes the different situations in which she had to choose between the heart and mind. Even though the women played a significant role in the epic, they were depicted as the supporting characters subservient to their male counterparts. It encourages women to stand headstrong to all the challenges without being vulnerable or dependent on anyone. That is the uniqueness of the novel, in which a female observes this world and the restrictions created by the world on her. So it highlights ambitious attempts of a female to find her gender identity. The text focuses on the pivotal relation and responsibility between womanhood and vengeance.

Divakaruni doesn't change the story, nor does she provide an alternative ending, but instead, she offers a fresh new perspective (Gupta, 2020). The novel opens up the incidents with three narrators, Draupadi, his brother, and her nurse DhaiMaa. The story begins from her introduction to the world in King Drupad's home and moves among flashbacks and present time, uncovering accounts of the past and working out characters. At the very beginning of the story, she finds her father's palace is suffocating to her, and she says, "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" (1). It is expressed by the nurse in her words, "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (1). In this novel, Panchali is portrayed as a young rebel, bold and beautiful, longing for her father's love and determined to leave a mark on this world. The princess who was born out of the fire is decreed that she will change the history becomes queen and builds for herself the palace of illusions, the most magnificent dwelling on earth made of marble and magic. Her worldly triumphs are paired with her spiritual failings, her pride, and her need for vengeance. Throughout her life, there is one constant element is the benevolent presence of Krishna, her greatest friend. Thus the novel creates an intimate feminine portrait that is both contemporary and timeless. Divakaruni's treatment of Draupadi as a subject takes us back to the mythological understanding, yet it builds our contemporary understanding of the feminine matters through the novel. (Yadav, 2015).

The title *The Palace of Illusions* refers to the magical palace built by the architect of the Asuras called Maya for Panchali and her five husbands immediately after their wedding. (Tandon, 2013). The evolution of Draupadi's self and identity is taking place mainly in this palace. It plays a significant role in providing her with space to emerge and shape her destiny. Hence, it is apt to call as the palace of illusions. The novel starts with the birth of Panchali from the sacred pyre of the sacrifice and develops through her life journey, and it concludes by her ultimate departure to attain salvation. Her birth story and other incidences which happened in

the palace were narrated to her by her granny DhaiMaa. She was not well accepted by her father when she came out of the fire. The prophecy was told to king Drupad that she would bring change in the course of history. “Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history” (5). Draupadi is a posterity of Drupad’s fire for retaliation against Drona; his childhood friend turned into an enemy. She is brought into the world out of the conciliatory fire, which he lights looking for retribution against Drona. He appeals to God for a male descendant who might accomplish this end and is honoured with a male child named Dhristadyumna. Draupadi, who comes following her sibling, is not normal by either the priests who performed King Draupad’s ceremony.

Panchali’s introduction to the world is joined by the divine prediction that she was destined to change history. Both herself and her brother were born out of the sacred fire, but her brother was named Drishtadyumna, which means “destroyer of enemies”, and she is called Draupadi, which means daughter of Drupad. She considers this name as an affirmation of the patriarchal dependency. She rejects this name and calls herself Panchali, which means ‘from the kingdom of Panchal’. This is considered as her first step to refuse the men to decide her life and destiny. Thus the novel upholds the question of gender and identity. She approached a sage to know about her destiny and came to learn that she would marry the five greatest heroes of her time, treated like a goddess, become the empress of the most magnificent magical palace, later loses it, responsible for the fierce war, cause for the deaths of millions, wins yet die alone. Sage advised her to “hold back your question”, “hold back your laughter”, “and hold back your curse”, but she did not like it.

Draupadi complains about the education which was not allowed to her, but her twin brother was given a need over her. She rebels against the typical training of females, the skills of painting, sewing, and pottery against the knowledge taught to her brother the lessons of royal rue, justice, and power. Her tutor told her that “A Kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life” (26). Her father gave the least importance to her education. It proves that no one often thought about the training of ladies, and ladies were needed to do what men needed them to do. The training was not given to ladies concerning men since they must deal with their spouses and supplicate that they bite the dust with brilliance on the combat zone. The condition of women in Indian society is limited to household activities, and a wide range of experiences like war, expedition, hunting, and limitless opportunities and freedom is implied distinctly for men. This unbending social design of patriarchal power made her in trouble.

The domineering male-centric force is shown in the time of Draupadi's Swayamvar. Though she has acquired the advantage of choosing her life partner in Swayamvar, it turned into a turning point in her life. Arjun, the third Pandava, wins the arrow-based archery challenge directed by Drupad to offer his delightful daughter. His consideration in keeping this challenge is to allure Arjun to attend the swayamwara because he knows that Arjun is the greatest archer of the time. Thus he fulfilled his desire. But Kunti, Their mother, said, "All five of you must marry this woman" (108). Among Kshatriya men, Polygamy was practised, but Ployandry was against the norm. Women must be chaste, dedicated, and loyal to a single man in their lifetime. But Panchali was forced to practice polyandry due to her mother-in-law. Without considering her will, it has been decided to share her among five Pandavas. Despite all odds, Draupadi was loyal to her husband and respected her mother-in-law. Despite being holy birth, she has to subdue everything and treat her with gender-biased.

During the time of the gambling game, she was gambled away by her husband. In front of all elders of the court, she was humiliated and disrobed by the tyrannical deed of Duryodhana. Panchali says, "I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered saree around me, I demanded help from my husband. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed. (191). Despite being the wife of five brave men, no one came to rescue her during her plight. In a time of her great sorrow, she calls Krishna, and he says, "*no one can shame you...if you don't allow it*" (193). These powerful words handed over the authority to her, and when she opened her eyes, she realized the miracle had happened. She "was still clothed, and Dussasan was on the floor in a swoon." (194). Divakaruni strengthens her further by cursing the Kauravas,

*"All of you will die in a battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenceless woman." (194).*

At the end of the sabha, Draupadi realizes that her husbands avenge her honour through the oath publicly she took, "I lifted my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because I knew that everything I said would come to pass. I will not comb it, until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (194). Here she uses her gender identity to create a new code of honour. She determined to revenge to do herself than her husbands. She is well aware that "their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation, were more important to them than my suffering" (195). She boldly uses her feminine identity as a tool to guarantee vengeance. At

the end of the novel, she decides to accompany her husbands on the spiritual journey. She says that “no woman had ever attempted” (343). She has become the woman who is recognized by the bards: “She was the only consort that dared accompany the raised her hand in brave farewell” (344). The restricted social gender inequalities disappear at the end of the story.

In this way, the novel reexamines the condition and life of women. It also reviews the contemporary issues like marginalization, exploitation, discrimination, and identity crisis of women in the male-dominated society. It shows us how Draupadi bravely determined to create her destiny and change history. Thus, it deconstructed the patriarchal binaries to establish the woman as a bold and determined character. The history of human civilization is male-dominated. Despite being subjugated and dominated, Draupadi has come up with all the odds and proved herself. Thus the novel is the prominent text of gender identification also. The novel concludes with a spiritual note that gender discrimination and patriarchy are temporary and confined to only this physical material world. We are strictly bound to our bodies and social environments that restrict the behaviour of males and females. But in the afterworld, these restrictions and boundaries are meaningless. Hence, the text implies finally that the social hierarchy and gender identities are connected to this material world only.

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