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Retelling the Indian Myths: A Postcolonial Peep into Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract:

This research article presents an analysis of Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* through postcolonial lens, elucidating the novel's contribution to understanding Indian mythology from different perspectives. The novel offers a complex reimagining of the Mahabharata, focusing on Draupadi's perspective and challenging traditional narratives. Through characters like Draupadi, marginalized voices are amplified, reflecting postcolonial theories of subaltern agency. Divakaruni engages in cultural resistance, reclaiming agency over mythological stories and decentering colonial hegemony. Identity and hybridity are explored through Draupadi's multifaceted character, aligning with postcolonial theories of cultural complexity. The novel acts as a form of decolonization by disrupting traditional power structures within the literary canon. Additionally, it reflects themes of postcolonial feminism through Draupadi's assertion of agency and critique of patriarchal norms. This article highlights cultural hybridity and syncretism, emphasizing the resilience of Indian cultural traditions in the face of colonialism.

Keywords: myths, identity, hybridity, postcolonial, resistance, patriarchy, etc.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a captivating retelling of the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, from the perspective of its central female protagonist, Draupadi. The novel begins with Draupadi's birth from a sacrificial fire, as prophesied by the sage Vyasa, to play a significant role in shaping the destiny of kings and kingdoms. As Draupadi grows up in the court of King Drupada of Panchala, she forms a close bond with her brother Dhri and dreams of a simple life filled with love and companionship. However, her life takes a dramatic turn when a *swayamvara* (a ceremony where a princess chooses her husband) is organized, and Draupadi's hand is won in marriage by Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers. Thus, she becomes the wife of all five Pandavas due to a

misunderstanding. Throughout the novel, Draupadi navigates the complexities of her relationships with the Pandava brothers, each of whom she shares a unique bond with. She also confronts the challenges posed by the political intrigues and power struggles of the time, including the infamous game of dice where her husband Yudhishtira gambles away everything, including Draupadi herself. Amidst the turmoil of the Kurukshetra War, Draupadi emerges as a symbol of strength and resilience, providing unwavering support to her husbands and playing a crucial role in motivating them for battle. Despite facing numerous hardships and injustices, she remains steadfast in her pursuit of justice and righteousness. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* concludes with Draupadi's transcendence, as she ascends to the heavens, leaving behind the mortal world and the illusions that had bound her. Through her journey, Draupadi emerges as a timeless icon of courage, resilience, and sacrifice, challenging traditional gender roles and narratives within Indian mythology. In this outstanding work of Chitra Divakaruni, several postcolonial concepts can be discerned, reflecting the author's engagement with the legacy of colonialism and its impact on Indian mythology and society.

Firstly, we see that in the novel, the subaltern voice is profoundly showcased through the character of Draupadi. Draupadi, often marginalized in traditional retellings of the Mahabharata, emerges as the central protagonist whose perspective challenges dominant narratives and power structures. Draupadi's narrative agency allows her to speak for herself and assert her experiences, desires, and struggles. Divakaruni voices Draupadi's inner thoughts and emotions, allowing readers to empathize with her perspective and understand her as a fully developed character rather than merely a passive figure in the epic. Draupadi's status as a woman in a patriarchal society positions her as a subaltern figure, marginalized and silenced by the dominant male voices surrounding her. Throughout the novel, Draupadi confronts the limitations placed upon her by societal expectations and gender norms, yet she continually asserts her agency and refuses to be confined by traditional roles. Her experiences of trauma and injustice, particularly during the game of dice where she is publicly humiliated and disrobed, highlight the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized individuals within society. Her outcry against the injustice inflicted upon her is a powerful expression of resistance against oppression. We also see her interacting in the novel with other subaltern characters, such as her friendship with the untouchable maid, Dasi, which shows her solidarity with those on the margins of society. Through these relationships, Draupadi demonstrates empathy and compassion towards others who share her experiences of marginalization and oppression. She

emerges as a powerful symbol of subaltern resistance and resilience in adversity. Like Divakaruni, Mahashweta Devi (1997, 2005) compares women in the Mahabharata to marginalized tribal women oppressed by middlemen exploiting them in the name of helping the deprived. In "Daupadiin," she shows how tribal women, marginalized by society, can challenge patriarchy when they reject its notions of shame and dignity. Spivak praises the story's heroine, Dopdi, as embodying what Draupadi from the patriarchal sacred texts could not be.

The novel also engages in an act of cultural resistance by reinterpreting the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, from a perspective that challenges colonial representations and biases. In voicing the subaltern and a complex and multifaceted protagonist, it challenges colonial representations of Indian culture, which often prioritize male-centered narratives and overlook the experiences of women. The novel also reclaims agency over mythological stories by offering alternative interpretations and perspectives on familiar characters and events. Divakaruni's retelling highlights the humanity and vulnerabilities of mythological figures, portraying them as multidimensional individuals with their fears, desires, and struggles. This approach subverts the notion of mythical heroes as flawless and infallible, presenting them instead as relatable and flawed beings, thereby challenging idealized colonial representations of Indian culture. Moreover, the novel interrogates the moral complexities and ambiguities inherent in the Mahabharata, encouraging readers to critically examine traditional notions of righteousness and justice. Divakaruni confronts colonial interpretations of Indian culture that essentialize and romanticize its religious and ethical principles. Throughout the narrative, Draupadi provides counsel and guidance to the Pandavas, often challenging their decisions and holding them accountable for their actions. Her wisdom and intelligence surpass those of her husbands, undermining patriarchal assumptions of female inferiority and subservience.

Another aspect of the novel is cultural hybridity through its depiction of Draupadi's interactions with diverse characters and cultures. Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas, who hail from different regions and kingdoms, symbolizes the merging of diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, Draupadi's friendship with characters like Krishna, who embodies both human and divine qualities, illustrates the fluidity of cultural boundaries and the potential for syncretism. We also find the complexities of hybrid identities within the context of social hierarchies and power dynamics. Draupadi's status as a princess and the wife of the Pandavas affords her privilege and influence, yet she also experiences marginalization and

discrimination due to her gender and lineage. Her hybrid identity as a royal woman married into a powerful family complicates her position within societal structures. She is shown navigating through multiple social, cultural, and gender identities. Divakaruni's portrayal of identity as fluid and multifaceted reflects postcolonial theories of hybridity, which emphasize the complex interplay of diverse cultural influences in colonized societies. Characters like Krishna posit religious syncretism, drawing from multiple religious and philosophical traditions to offer guidance and wisdom. Draupadi's encounters with divine beings and supernatural phenomena further blur the boundaries between mythology and reality, proclaiming the syncretic nature of Indian religious beliefs. Divakaruni challenges the dominance of male-centred narratives in Indian mythology. This act of decolonizing the canon aligns with postcolonial efforts to decenter Eurocentric perspectives and amplify marginalized voices in literature. Dasi, Draupadi's maid, is a significant character whose voice is foregrounded throughout the novel. Their friendship provides insight into the struggles of lower-caste individuals within society. Dasi's experiences and interactions with Draupadi offer a perspective on social hierarchies and inequalities, emphasizing the importance of amplifying marginalized voices.

The Palace of Illusions is a seminal work of postcolonial feminism. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses bildungsroman and likes to write stories about women that are similar to her own experiences. She notices that in her stories, there are often conflicts between men and women. Divakaruni herself moved to the West from India, and she understands the struggles of immigrant women who face problems like domestic violence and trafficking. Divakaruni believes that strong women can make society better if they are treated with respect. However, she also worries about significant changes happening too quickly. She wants to keep the good parts of Indian culture while embracing some things from Western culture. In her writing, Divakaruni uses a technique called "adjectifying," which means adding lots of details to make stories more vivid and alive (Goncalves). In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi, the main character, does this to the events she witnesses, making them more colourful and meaningful.

The Mahabharata has been studied since the ancient times as a source for inspiration in every field of life: political, religious, social and cultural reformation. As Prof. Deshpande remarks, myths are an integral part of Indian culture and society: "If there is one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of the Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the Mahabharata" (199). *The Palace of*

Illusions is a great achievement of its writer in retelling Indian mythology. Myths, whether factual or fictional, are narratives from the past that shape a society's understanding of reality. They serve as a means for people to interpret reality through the lens of their cultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs, passed down through generations regardless of their cultural, social, or political affiliations. Myths reflect the values and priorities of a culture at a particular time, providing a framework for understanding what was considered significant. They are structured information used for education, imparting moral values, and reinforcing cultural norms. Additionally, myths contribute to the perpetuation of societal standards and may sometimes lead to the formation of stereotypes. In his book *The Power of Myth*, Campbell writes that myth serves four functions. The first is the mystical function realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder we are, and experiencing awe before this mystery. The second is a cosmological dimension, the dimension with which science is concerned showing us what shape the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery again comes through. The third function is the sociological one, supporting and validating a specific social order. It is the sociological function of myth that has taken over in our world and it is out of date. However, there is a fourth function of myth, and this is the one that everyone must try today to relate to and that is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. Divakaruni adeptly delves into Campbell's delineation of the third and fourth functions of myth in *The Palace of Illusions*. Rather than condemning societal structures or transforming into a didactic piece, the narrative remains within an alternative discourse. It offers a fresh perspective by narrating episodes from Draupadi's point of view. Divakaruni strategically selects Draupadi to present an alternative discourse that challenges the prevailing patriarchal narrative. The influence of patriarchal discourse from an early age is evident in Dhir's education, where his teacher encourages him to generalize women as "the root of all the world's troubles" (24). By juxtaposing Draupadi's perspective with Dhristadyumna's at the outset of the text, as they recount their father's journey to the throne (16), Divakaruni effectively establishes a framework that primes her readers for a succession of alternative narratives. From the moment Draupadi receives her name, she senses that it elevates her father Drupad while diminishing her identity. Being merely an appendage to her brother, born from a yagna, intensifies this feeling of insignificance for Draupadi. Her name is seen as self-centred, and she yearns for a heroic identity of her own (5), marking the start of her challenge against patriarchal societal norms.

Draupadi is objectified by her husbands, father, and Kunti, as they prioritize their honour over her well-being, treating her as a pawn. Only when she resides in her own palace does she assert her independence. Dhir believes family honour outweighs all else (85), driving the characters' actions. While it is considered virtuous for the Pandavas to obey their mother, Arjun's failure to defend Draupadi is seen as a severe betrayal. The traditional concept of marriage is shattered, with the brothers' inability to challenge Kunti's decision deemed unethical. Divakaruni highlights the unilateral decision to grant Draupadi the boon of virginity, seemingly to satisfy male ego (120). Draupadi, given a choice, would have asked to be devoted to one husband at a time (120). Dhairya Ma warns Draupadi about well-meaning yet dangerous men who believe in the righteousness of their actions (135). Draupadi concludes that men are primarily driven by honour, which they take more seriously than women. Draupadi can understand men better only after the attempt of her disrobing in Kauravas' court as she states:

All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me, they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. 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 wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. ... For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride. (195)

Daschaudhari reveals that Divakaruni's Draupadi is a more light-hearted character, and appears less burdened by her dharma as daughter and wife. It is Vyasa (appearing in the role of a fortune-teller in this novel) who makes her aware of her impending fate. We read from the novel, "You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses... You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time... Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history" (39). Daschaudhari also opines that Divakaruni's heroine is a girl who may be born in the times of yore but her expectations from life, her desires, her outlook of the world is that of a twentieth century girl (182).

The novel highlights Draupadi's quest for identity through her narrative in the first person, making her the voice of women. She prioritizes intellectual pursuits over traditional

feminine activities, seeking knowledge in philosophy, political science, and law. Despite her excitement at the prospect of choosing her husband at the Swayamvar, Krishna warns her about the complexities of truth and destiny - ". . .but it may not be what you are imagining. Truth, like a diamond has many facets" (55). The test at the Swayamvar proves challenging, with warriors having to hit a target they can only see indirectly. Krishna assures Draupadi of her destined union with Bharat's greatest hero. Despite falling in love with Karna upon seeing his portrait, she learns more about his background and feels increasingly drawn to him- "I longed to look into Karna's face, to see if those eyes were indeed as said as the artist had portrayed, but even I knew how improper that would be. I focused on his hands, the wrists disdainfully bare of ornaments, the powerful, battered knuckles." (93) However, her duty to her family leads her to reject Karna's proposal, though her love for him endures throughout the story. Marwood Larson-Harris writes that Divakaruni's most striking innovation is Draupadi harbouring an illicit desire for Karna. He also writes that 'dharma' which is the vital theme in original *Mahabharata* figures occasionally in Divakaruni's version. Draupadi's retelling of the story shifts the focus to the challenging emotions that complicate duty, such as anger, resentment, and suppressed desire, which dominate her life. While the original Draupadi also touches on these themes, *The Palace of Illusions*, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, notably omits the inevitable Brahmana dharma lectures. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi also delves into her concerns regarding the status of women in Hindu society and the plight of the underprivileged, exemplified by characters like Ekalavya. These concerns, although not novel, are articulated in a manner that resonates with contemporary sensibilities through the voice of the protagonist. Additionally, Krishna is depicted as a more relatable figure, a carefree wanderer who playfully teases Draupadi about her cooking skills and imparts Gita-like lessons on detachment.

To conclude, it is not extreme to say that *The Palace of Illusions* is an inevitably brilliant work of re-narrativizing the Indian epic *Mahabharata* with a unique sense of perception and style. In the book review of *The Palace of Illusions*, James Purdon writes, "A little jejune at times, Divakaruni's elegant and languid prose remains seductive as it reimagines the woman at the heart of the story and weaves myth into a modern idiom." As Divakaruni mentions in the "author's note", she was left unsatisfied with the part the women play in the epic, "somehow they (the women) remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or

sons" (xiv). Re-writing of the epic was for Divakaruni, a way to give voice to the women, to "place the women in the forefront of the action...to uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits." (xv). And thus, it is that Divakaruni portrays the heroine of the Mahabharata, a reflection of a modern-day girl and woman, retelling her story, "with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*" (xv).

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