

# Myth and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

B.V.Bividha

*Research Scholar,*

Department of English,

Rani Anna Govt. College for Women, Tirunelveli-8.

bividha93@gmail.com

## Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a prominent place in Indian English Writing. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* is the re-telling of Vyasa's *The Mahabharata* which has uniqueness of its own. Divakaruni's tale narrates the epic in Draupadi's voice. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of culture and myth already inherent in the original text. *The Palace of Illusions* is about women discrimination, their struggles, identity, male domination, unique female perspectives and position of women during the period of *The Mahabharata*. The humiliation that went through is given as the challenges of Draupadi's life shows in the epic and how women need to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any questions. The views of Draupadi are totally different from those of ordinary women and the outcomes are as powerful as she is. Her determination and courage has been explained all through the novel. It has its own charm to and hold on the reader. Whether it is ancient or modern period, the life of women has not had any changes, it has had only challenges to face and act according to the context. It shows how a woman born as a princess, and suffered in her life. Cultural Studies is the study of the ways in which culture is constructed and organized and the ways in which it evolves and changes over time. This paper is a sincere attempt to explore myth and modernity clashing with each other to give birth to a new face. It offers a new interpretation of the voice of Draupadi as depicted by the novelist.

**Key Words:** Myth, Modernity, Tradition, Culture, Identity, Gender, Humiliation.

Cultural Studies is the study of the ways in which culture is constructed and organized and the ways in which it evolves and changes over time. Cultural studies is an innovative, interdisciplinary field of research and teaching that investigates the way in which “culture” creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations and power. Cultural studies researchers generally investigate how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena, such as ideology, class structures, national formations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation. Cultural studies views cultures not as fixed, bounded, stable, and discrete entities, but rather as constantly interacting and changing sets of practices and processes.

The reappearance of myth has been presented with a modern perspective by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions*. A combination of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world is presented here through the retelling, which is a predictable message for those who are rooted in the accepted traditionalism and also for those who remain uprooted from the moral ethics of their own culture. Divakaruni has shown Draupadi as a contemporary woman who want to express her thoughts and ideas to the world. Divakaruni has tried to bring out the past into present in a different way by showing the story of love, betrayal, revenge, war, freedom and friendship. The characters taken for analysis are related to the great epic *The Mahabharata* yet they have their relevance in social and cultural paradigm of the society. The writer has made every attempt to bridge the vacuum of tradition and modernity. The book is also significant for its presentation of olden history of the country India.

Though the book *The Palace of Illusions* is a mythical as well as historical text yet the writer has given a humanistic touch to the whole script. At one level, it deals with the life of Kaurava and Pandava’s familial story and their complex relationship. But, the writer has analyzed that characters based on common man’s life and sees the resistance. She has also studied that how the olden traditional rules and rituals are powerful even today and responding to the mythical era’s culture. Divakaruni has analyzed the character of Panchali with the patriarchal ideology where a woman is considered inferior to the man in every precept of life. Every concept is relative to her life. There is a popular folkway in south India that ‘A woman with long hair spells destruction

for her husband.' So, the young woman is appreciated to reduce their hair in south India even today. Women had to sacrifice their life for the future husband.

The centre of focus is always on men in the great epic *The Mahabharata*. Divakaruni presents Draupadi's life as a series of choices made by herself and not by the people around her, thus giving her a voice in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society that prevailed in Ancient India.

Draupadi has been portrayed negative in the social discourse and no one finds it attractive to name their daughters after her. Such girls are known to be a kritiya, one who brings doom to her clan. But, Divakaruni has analyzed the character of Panchali with full zeal and sanctity. She sees Panchali as one of the powerful and independent character who fights for her liberation. She affirms her individuality and self-esteem. Panchali's character has been played as role-performer who loses her to his opponent in a game of dice. Subsequently, opponent people made every effort to harass Panchali by removing her sari. This harassment was not less than sexual harassment or abuse. She was not given help by any one. Thus, this harassment is a reflection of male supremacy. She proves herself courageous when she constantly fights with the opponents. She is not the only character who fights or sacrifices but there are other powerful characters in the novel such as Kunti, Gandhari and many more had single aim to play their role in significant manner.

In the novel, *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi's character is not as a woman who suffers within herself and is not able to speak about her views. She brings out a strong trajectory of her own. Her first impact was on education which is not given to her as her brother was given priority over her. Her tutor told her brother to inform her that "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (26). Her father and tutor neglected her education. When she questioned her brother "who decided that woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (26). The brother replied that is what I'd like you to do. This shows that nobody cared about the education of women and women were required to do what men wanted them to do. Here Divakaruni tries to bring out the old practice of every woman of those periods whether she was a queen or a normal woman. Education was not given to women as for men, because their duty is to take care of their husbands and to pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.

Marriage is taken as their decision to abide by social regime and family acceptance. Swayamwara means the practice of searching their own groom. Draupadi was subjected to Swayamwara, but she was

already pledged for Arjun by her family and Krishna. To fulfill her father's desire she is forced to surrender herself to whatever her father points out. Divakaruni conveys that in this male-dominated society, a daughter is a toy in the hands of her own family. The feelings or emotions of women are not given importance as the priority was on the words and promises given to others. Women were taken as slaves by men to obey their orders without any comment. She was burning with inner anguish. In some places Draupadi failed to express her views when Kunti asked her to marry all the five. She was waiting for Arjun to stand up for her against marrying all the five as they were committed to each other but nobody protested against the words of Kunti. Thus, she becomes a victim of a social evil polyandry. In those times it was a common thing as many women were subjected to polyandry.

In this novel, the readers can feel that Draupadi not only remains in the epic as a passive being but also rises up to become a symbol for modern woman figure in recent times. Draupadi raises her voice in Duryodhana's court where she was gambled away by her husband. She questioned the elders in the court that once a person was sold as slave they had no right to wager others, but she was mistaken to discover that the laws of men would not save her. The description of the scene in the novel as it proves that the law which was equal to all would not be same for women. This brings before the reader a society which surrendered the rights of women. Draupadi stays as a strong person and shows that she never lowers herself to them by begging for her dignity. She re-invents herself as a powerful woman that is not dependent on her husband in the hour of need. She ever got an answer for any of her questions in the court. Her anger and revenge for the shameful act against her was the reason for the war which ended in the death of Kauravas.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi played the role not only as a strong woman but also a sorrowful person who wishes to be with Karna, comparing her husbands with Karna and always is apologetic for the insult that she threw on Karna's way during her Swayamwar. Till her death, Draupadi keeps a special place for Karna where she regrets not having divulged her feelings to him. Her feelings for Sri Krishna are also more those of a friend. Sri Krishna was a companion, caretaker and guide in every deed from the beginning to the end. This may be the reason for her to fall for Sri Krishna.

Divakaruni has shown Karna as a tragic hero as he had all the skills but could not defeat enemies and the one who is longing for the love of Draupadi. He died by knowing all the truth and not able to react or

accept any of it. Kunti's character is given as the plotting mother-in-law in the novel where Kunti always thought only about her children's honor, wealth and happiness. It can be interpreted as the love of mother towards her children and against the betrayal of Duryodhana. Kunti did not try to understand the sufferings or feelings of her daughters-in law in any part of the novel, she acts as an authoritative mother-in-law.

Draupadi and her feelings are shaped through patriarchal settings where Draupadi is confined to the story of sacrifice and spiritual awakening. Divakaruni's women experience love, loss and longing through bitter tastes of the world they struggle for. Scriptures are so powerfully established in our cultural paradigms that one cannot challenge and overcome them easily. Myth and history gives new voice to Panchali which subverts her positioning under the present socio-cultural paradigms. Myth cannot be an ideal image or an ultimate identity of a woman. She should have her own address and identity. There are two addresses of Panchali: the first is, she is the daughter of Panchal, a royal king of an Indian province and second, she is the wife of the Pandava brothers which is also considered an abuse to someone if you call her Panchali. Hence, Panchali shifts her identity from one space to other but she fails to establish her own horizon where she can fly in the open sky. This is the problem that has been raised in *The Palace of Illusions*. Myth, legend and history are the artifacts to carry the information from one cultural space to another but their role becomes more significant when they represent the contemporary society. They represent the image of the social as well as cultural fabric of the society. People decode the meanings through the text developed in the concerned cultural scripts. Divakaruni has also decoded that meanings through the signs and images and enacted with the humanistic touch. Panchali represents the myth and image of the contemporary society.

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