



## **ANALYSIS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND ISSUES OF WOMEN IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS**

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**Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a novelist and poet who has won several awards for her work, published her novel *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* in 2008. Doubleday was the publisher who distributed it. The Mahabharata is retold in this novel from Draupadi's perspective, that of a woman navigating a patriarchal society. The novel is a retelling of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Taking us back to a time that is half history, half myth, and wholly magical, bestselling author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to Panchaali, the fire-born heroine of the Mahabharata, as she weaves a vibrant retelling of an ancient epic saga. The Mahabharata is an ancient Indian epic that recounts the story of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Panchaali, who is married to five royal husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom, aids her husbands in their quest to reclaim their birthright by remaining by their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. Her husbands have been married to her since they were children. As she is caught up in the ever-manipulating hands of fate, she is unable to reject either her difficult friendship with the enigmatic Krishna or her hidden desire to the mysterious man who is her husband's most deadly opponent. Both of these things are impossible for her to ignore.

**Keywords:** *Banerjee, Women, the Palace Of Illusions*

**Introduction**

Chitra Banerjee *The Mahabharata*, which is considered to be the greatest Hindu epic, is retold in Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*. The storyline that is told in the novel is not dissimilar to the one told in the original. Having a female figure narrate the story, on the other hand, makes this particular telling of the tale stand apart from others. The author of the book has decided to make a female character the main focus of the narrative in order to provide readers with a fresh perspective on the well-known tale of the ancient Hindu epic, which would have been more appropriate if the protagonist had been a male figure. A retelling of the Mahabharata told through Draupadi's point of view may be found in *The Palace of Illusions*. The project is centred on a feminist interpretation of the text, and it makes note of the narration that is presented from the viewpoint of a female character. Divakaruni's character in her retelling of the modern version of the Mahabharata is notable because she was able to incorporate a captivating protagonist into her creation. This makes her work worth mentioning. The original story has been retold in such a way that it is suitable for use in the present day since it has been able to do the female character,

who was created by the writer, justice. Written in the first person narrative, the author has provided opportunities for her female characters to come forward and describe their own personal experiences within the context of their respective storylines. The novel allocates a significant amount of space to female characters, which gives readers the opportunity to consider the plot from a feminist perspective while also giving them the impression that the presentation of a story they are already familiar with is enhanced by the author's use of a feminist point of view. Despite the fact that Draupadi is depicted as a major factor in the end of the Third Age of Man (Dwarapa Yug) and that Divakaruni refers to her as a Kritiya, or one who brings disaster to her family, Divakaruni, with her wide and magnificent lenses, presents her central female character with a variety of viewpoints. Her feminine persona is fearless and self-assured, and she is resolute in her pursuit of the life objective she has set for herself. She has the ability to craft a history that is memorable even many years after it has been written. The ladies in Divakaruni's narrative have been granted more agencies as a result of the author's writing. The women described in her narrative are neither subservient nor timid in any way. Neither of them are willing to be subordinate.

They are fearless and the ones that bring about change. They have a strong will and consistently attain their goals. They are shown as having the same value and potential as men in the culture. Because the author approaches the subject from this angle, it is possible to claim confidently that *The Palace of Illusions* presents a feminist interpretation of the Mahabharata. The narrator of the novel is not your typical person to narrate a narrative. She is known as Panchaali, also known as Draupadi, the princess who was born of fire. The protagonist of the book that Divakaruni has written is not a passive or subservient person at all; rather, she is an independent woman who is determined to make her own decisions. The female protagonist of the tale fights for her independence and legal entitlements. This initiative makes an effort to go deeper than the traditionally male-dominated perspectives on the way women are portrayed in literary works. However, a feminist literary analysis of the novel has been very scarce in compared to a general patriarchal idea of the study of female characters in texts in general. [Citation needed] [Citation needed] [Citation needed] [Citation needed] [Citation needed] [Citation needed] This initiative aims to close this significant knowledge gap. In her book, the author portrayed Draupadi as a courageous and independent protagonist. In spite of living in a patriarchal environment, she has the courage to put herself up as a strong candidate and is able to do so effectively.

Draupadi is able to maintain her courage in both her decisions and the things she does, despite the fact that she is subjected to various challenges and obstructions throughout her life. In the article "Told in the first person, Divakaruni's narrative takes us through the epic in Draupadi's perspective," which was published in the *Hindustan Times* by Renuka Narayanan, the author presents a similar viewpoint of the character in the novel. From being born of the sacrificial fire (hence her beautiful name, "Yajnaseni," though the author doesn't use it, preferring "Panchali") to her strange, lonely childhood, her tricky marriage to five men with a persecution problem and a control freak mother, her own, lovely home at last, and then the unbelievable traumas that follow that nobody should have to go through (but millions of refugees do)," "From being born of the sacrificial fire (12). Dr. S. G. Puri argues that "Divakaruni talks of the societal conditioning of a woman who declines her standing in the cultural paradigm in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*." In addition to this, she discusses the relevance of cultural scripts, which force a woman to

negotiate the space that she has carved out for herself by undergoing agency. The organisation contributes to the achievement of the goals set by the society. (1). This research provides an insightful analysis of the depiction of the female character as well as the depiction of the lives of women in the texts.

At various points in their lives, women of all ages, social levels, racial and religious backgrounds, and national origins are subjected to prejudice. They end up being victims of the violence that exists in the society. Draupadi's life, like most women's lives, is controlled by a variety of male chauvinists. She is a woman who is destined to change the course of history, but she is a woman who is driven and forceful enough to build her own self-identity. The investigation into the problems faced by women is the fundamental purpose of this study. Deconstructing patriarchal binaries in order to present women as strong and self-assured protagonists is the primary objective of this work. Always with the end goal of defining, achieving, and protecting equal political, economic, and social rights for women, feminism's primary focus is on equality. In addition to this, it attempts to create an environment in which women have equal access to educational and job possibilities.

"From a feminist perspective, when we interpret texts or anything else, the way to deal with our subjectivity is not to try to avoid it but to be aware of it as possible, to include it in our interpretation as fully as possible, so that others will be able to take it into account when evaluating our viewpoints," says Lois Tyson, who narrates about the process of analysing any literary text from a feminist point of view (95). Feminism is a political movement that began in the late 1960s with the objective of defining, creating, and protecting equal political, economic, and social rights for women in both theory and practise. Its origins may be traced back to the women's liberation movement of the time period. Feminism addresses the particularities of location, culture, and the requirements of women who have been marginalised throughout history. It is impossible to separate feminist theory from women's political activities and their fight against the gender prejudices of patriarchal society. Feminist theory is inextricably related to both of these aspects. It focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality with the intention of gaining an understanding of the root causes of gender inequality via the investigation of the social roles and experiences of real-life women.

Feminism focuses mostly on the unequal connection that exists between males and females as its primary concern. Men have traditionally held the roles as primary breadwinners, spiritual and political leaders, and political leaders. However, women are restricted to their roles as homemakers inside the family. Males are expected to be independent, self-reliant, educated, centred, active, and knowledgeable of both good and evil, whereas females are expected to be dependent, weak, emotionally unstable, irrational, submissive, and marginalised. Males are also expected to have the ability to know the difference between good and evil. Whatever admirable qualities men ascribed to them, women were portrayed as embodying the polar opposites of those qualities. Regarding this topic, Simone de Beauvoir writes the following in her highly acclaimed book *The Second Sex*: "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (xv). The subordinating tendency is responsible for the depiction of the guy as possessing both positive and neutral characteristics.

In actuality, the relative positions of various social groupings within the available social and political space do not necessarily correspond to one another. This is especially true in regard to the situation of females. The composition of a society has a significant bearing on the degree to which women are present, the amount of their involvement, and the efficacy with which their individual rights are protected. In human civilization, the topic of gender disparity between men and women has long been a hot topic of conversation. When compared to men, women have traditionally been regarded as possessing less desirable traits and being less capable of performing certain functions within society. Inequalities based on gender are encouraged by patriarchy, which establishes males as superior to women and women as inferior, as well as men as strong and women as helpless. Due to patriarchy, men are the only ones who are granted significant rights, and women are relegated to the role of creatures whom men find appealing. In a culture that is patriarchal, men see women as objects rather than as fellow members of society. In these kinds of communities, women are forced to live with the defined expression and discrimination that is based on factors such as their gender, race, age, social status, religion, and so on. The idea that "I am a male and she is a woman" always had a strong influence on men. She is weak, but I am powerful. I am rough, but she is sensitive. I don't rely on anybody else, yet she's essential" (Ruth 55).

Simone de Beauvoir is another thinker who has contributed to defining the term "woman" and her place in the social discourse. In *The Second Sex*, the author opens up on the way women have been stolen and how they are treated by writing, "Woman? She is a womb, an ovary, and a female; the fact that she is a female is all that is necessary to characterise her with only one word. Those who prefer straightforward explanations will find this quite easy. When used by a man, the derogatory term "female" has the tone of an insult; but, a guy who is not embarrassed of his animal nature takes great pride in being told, "He is masculine!" The word "female" is derogatory, not because it connects a woman to the natural world, but rather because it limits a woman to her sexuality. (21).

Women are frequently understood in relation to males in traditional definitions. Their sense of self is inextricably linked to the males in their lives. She does not have her own identity, and she is not capable of acting on her own. Additionally, Beauvoir explains that "male and man defines woman not in herself but as related to him; she is not considered as an autonomous entity." (44). Divakaruni, on the other hand, has created a female character who is courageous and powerful enough to fight a society that is ruled by males. She does this by abandoning the patriarchal conventions and laws that have been established for women. The author of the tale considers Draupadi to be one of the strong and self-reliant characters in the story. In the story, Draupadi is shown to be the one who is capable of fighting for her own freedom. We discover that she is able to challenge the patriarchal society because she is able to confirm her uniqueness, self-esteem, and the need to build an identity for herself. The narrator, who is depicted by Divakaruni's character, is a strong, independent woman who rejects the notion that a woman's identity should be constrained by the presence of males in her life. Divakaruni's character has a lot of authority. It is difficult for her to accept the name that was chosen for her by her father. Because of this, she decides to change her name to Panchaali rather than continue using her birth name, Draupadi, which literally means "daughter of Drupada" (meaning derived from the Kingdom of Panchaal). The text makes it quite apparent that Draupadi is hated by the characters:

He said, "I name you," before giving the name Dhristadyumna to your sibling and walking away. He said to you, I name you Draupadi. And when we held the most amazing banquet that his nation has ever seen before... There was nothing inherently wrong with giving him the name Dhri; nevertheless, if I were his mother or father, I probably would have selected a more uplifting nickname for him, such Light of the Universe or Celestial Victor. The choice of Dhri as a name was not completely out of the question. However, she is a daughter of Drupad? Even taking into consideration the fact that he hadn't been expecting me to arrive, couldn't my father have come up with anything that was, for lack of a better word, less egoistic? Something that would be more appropriate for a lady who was destined to change the direction that history would take At this point in time, I had no choice but to reply to Draupadi because she was the only option I had. On the other hand, continuing in this manner would not be possible in the long run. I wanted a name with more of a heroic connotation. (5)

She articulates her desire to advance her education, well conscious of the circumstances she finds herself in and the role that education plays in her life overall. "These were the teachings that imparted power, and they were the ones I most resented him for having. They were the people whose identities I had to uncover if I wanted to alter the course of history (27). She is a fundamentally transformative figure. She is a fighter for her right to receive an education. Even while she is receiving instruction, the tutor himself acts as a source of discouragement for her. There are several pieces of evidence that go in that direction throughout the book.

*"O great prince," he said now, "kindly ask your princess to refrain from prompting you. She is not helping you to learn. Will she be sitting behind you in your chariot in battle when you need to remember these important precepts? Perhaps it is best if she no longer joins during your studies." He was always trying to discourage me from attending Dhri's lessons — and he wasn't the only one. A first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. (23)*

Bold and determined she didn't let the chance to educate herself from her life. Rather she started to protest the discouragement silently and with smiles when she and her brother were taught about 'women'.

*Additionally, I resented the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's troubles. Perhaps that was why, when he gathered up his palm leaf manuscripts and rose to leave, I pushed the curtain aside and gave him a brilliant smile as I bowed. The effect was better than I had hoped. He jumped as though stung; manuscript fell, helter-skelter, from his hands. I had to pull the end of my sari over my face to hide my laughter, although I knew there would be trouble later. But inside a current surged through me at the discovery of a power I didn't know I had. (24-25)*

Women are regarded as the one who need to take care of men. They should be able to please men. Women should know how to accomplish household tasks and the art and crafts necessary to please a man. Her beauty and her feminine qualities are given much priority than her intellectuality. Also, in R.K.Narayan's

The Indian Epics Retold, Yudhishtira describes Panchali as “the goddess Lakshmi herself in stature, grace and complexion; eyes like lotus petals; a woman who is an ideal wife to guide, serve and sustain a man at all times” (260). Contradicting the above hierarchical notions, Banerjee has come up with a powerful voice to justify the important role of women in her epic. Her female character doesn’t like being the woman the society wants her to be.

I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet.) I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me (29).

The character Divakaruni has presented is an individual woman who is rebellious in nature. She can’t live a happy life under the control from the men in her life. Despite her brother forcing her to concentrate in feminine interests she is determined to learn what a king was supposed to know. Therefore she secretly learns war skills and political lessons which men were only supposed to learn then. She is able to make her decisions on with whom to get married. People with dark skin colour had to pass through racial discrimination and the condition of women were more difficult. Draupadi too had to undergo with various difficulties but she befriended Krishna — a dark skinned man. “Perhaps the reason Krishna and I got along so well was that we were both severely dark-skinned. In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin-whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse” (7). People tried to teach Draupadi the feminine nature dancing and walking slowly and other attributes of females. Beauvoir too writes, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and eunuch that is called feminine” (293). Draupadi was aware of the situation and didn’t comply with the general notion of the women how they were supposed to be. “Women are subject to economic constraints and discrimination, which are usually imposed on them to a greater degree than men, both within and outside of the family. Another cultural norm that maintains women’s submissiveness and inferiority is reflected in the attitude that children cannot be raised in an appropriate and healthy way by one parent, and all the more so if the mother raises them alone, without a father” (3) writes Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia in his article On the Characteristics of Patriarchal Societies, Gender Inequality, and Wife Abuse: The Case of Palestinian Society. But the character Kunti had raised her all five sons without a father more appropriate and healthy ones that a society envies to make such children. Her character Kunti is able to raise five children in the absence of their father. She is able even to keep all her child in her control and even is able to help them get their position.

The evidence is seen in the text when Arjun brings home Draupadi for the first time. She tells him to share it with his brothers whatever he has brought. Kunti devoted her life to help the Pandava brothers to become royal kings. In this regard, Divakaruni has not only presented her central character in a powerful role but she has also portrayed other female characters in the text as the powerful ones. Kunti was even

bold enough to deliver a child before getting married in the then society. It shows how the women were willing to take a risk than to stay on the comfort zone in the then time. Shikhandi with her reincarnation takes revenge with Bheesma for the assault he has done to her. Not only them but Draupadi even stands bold and speaks when she was supposed to remain silent during a ceremony where she was to choose her better half. Not only that but even after getting married with Arjuna she was divided with all other four brothers. She manages all of them and plays a vital role in keeping an intact relationship between the brothers in the family. She is powerful and an independent character who fights with the males for her liberation. To affirm her individuality and her self esteem she fights, and does her best that she needs to come forth with.

Despite Yudhisthira losing her in the game of dice to his opponent Duryodhan and being sexually harassed in the King's court she doesn't lose her hope. Rather she takes a vow to never tie her hair until and unless she dips her hair in the blood of those opponents. It was a challenge for the male dominated society where a female was supposed to be a weak character. She is able to prove herself that indeed she is courageous and is able to take revenge with the perpetrators. She was not the one who would let the things go off her hand. Rather she became the cause for the Pandava brothers to settle their family disputes. Women are supposed to be emotional and sympathetic but here Draupadi is presented as a woman full of revenges. Women who weren't expected to see war has become the cause of war. Not only the cause but here Draupadi is also given the 'special vision' of seeing the important parts of the Great War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Hidimba, Bheem's other wife raises the child on her own and even sends him to the war.

Not only Draupadi but there are some other characters who are presented as a strong character in the novel. If we are to look at Gandhari then we can see her as a bold character who has sacrificed her vision for the sake of her visually impaired husband. She has made a great sacrifice in her life that none of the males would do in their life by blindfolding herself. Uttara who has even lost her husband Abhimanyu in the war is hopeful of her child that she is carrying in her. Despite being in the trauma of losing her husband she is hopeful about the future. All these shows that women do not stick on the same old thing rather they prefer to move ahead with the flow of the time. In a conversation between Dhai Ma and Draupadi we come to know that how a female is taken into account when she has sexual relationship with more than one man."You know what our shastras call women who've been with more than one man, don't you? Though no one seems to have a problem when men sleep with a different wife each day of the week!" (42).

However, Draupadi being married with five men in her life is able to remove the tag of "slut" the society calls for women who sleep with multiple men. The virginity of the women was supposed to be protected. Neither anyone should touch them nor should the women think about any men. Doing such things would make them corrupted. In the conversation between Shikhandi and Panchaali when Shikhandi narrates the conversation between Salva and Amba we come to know that the women are of nowhere if someone touches her. However the women in Divakaruni's novel are fully aware of such situations and their sexual rights where Amba protesting says that: "If someone grasps my hand against my will, how does that make me his? I said, I'm the one who decides to whom I belong" (48). The characters the novelist has created are bold enough to know their status and are fully aware about it. The women described in the text are

more aware about the men around them. Draupadi even was aware about her father who was a representative of the male patriarchal society. However she was decisive and was bold enough. “In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, may be even indulgent. But I couldn’t forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn’t trust him completely” (6). This shows how the women are able to make decisions on their own and use their fundamental rights accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

*The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* is a 2008 novel by award-winning novelist and poet Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It was released by Doubleday. The novel is a rendition of the Hindu epic Mahabharata as told from Draupadi’s viewpoint, namely, that of a woman living in a patriarchal world. Human civilization has historically been patriarchal or male dominated. The domination and subjugation of women is clearly seen in the text. But despite those discrimination and subjugation women have come up with their powerful nature. How they have been able to give decisions on the actual time, how they have been able to raise the family in the absence of their better halves these women are actually bold enough to become an exemplary in the society. They are able to create an identity of their own while rejecting the norms and values that have always marginalized the women. While challenging the patriarchal norms and values of the society these women have proved themselves to be someone not less than their male counterparts.

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