

-THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS : A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT: *Women's writing is a medium of expression and an outlet for one's emotions and desires. It has surely gained momentum in the present age. Far from being submissive and frail, we now see women as iconoclasts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her masterpiece **The Palace of Illusions** explores how the patriarchal set - up of the society has dominated even the epic **Mahabharata**. She shows the fact that for centuries all over the world women have been forced to be in the marginalized position. The events of Mahabharata are narrated by Panchali , therefore her voice acquires universal significance. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's **The Palace of Illusions** is a judicious retelling of the Mahabharata myth in a feminist perspective.*

Key Words: *Iconoclast - Patriarchal - Marginalized - Feminist - Retelling - Mahabharata.*

The writers of the Indian Diaspora have written about various complications faced by them in their works. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer. She was born in India but later on migrated to America. She is best known for a creative genre called magical realism. Her major works include **The Mistress of Spices** (1997), **Sister of My Heart** (1999), **The Vine of Desire** (2003) and **The Palace of Illusions** (2009). She is known for her careful exploration of the immigrant experience, particularly that of South Asian Women.

Chitra Banerjee has portrayed the feminine sensibility in her works. As a writer she puts stress on the fact that her character, whether they are exclusively Indian or Western, are on the whole human beings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is gifted with rare cultural consciousness. The time of Mahabharata represents one of the most crucial crisis in entire civilization. All the significant men of that time fought on the battle field of Kurukshetra. The novel, **The Palace of Illusions** by Chitra Banerjee is written beyond the battlefield and she examines this crisis in mythology from a feminist perspective.

The Palace of Illusions takes us back to the world of the Indian epic **The Mahabharata** - a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical. Chitra Banerjee through her narrator Panchali, the wife of the legendary five Pandava brothers, gives us a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story. Divakaruni's inbuilt tendency towards the upliftment of the female gender seems to have motivated her to write the ancient epic **Mahabharata** from a female point of view. While the mythic tale gives Panchali a secondary personage, Divakaruni in her retelling with a modern twist places her at the center of her narrative. The novel is written in first person with Panchali as the speaker. The novel traces Panchali's life, beginning with her magical birth in fire as the daughter of king Drupad. Born from the fire, it was prophesied before her birth that she will change the course of history.

Her partriarchy- affirmed name Draupadi, which means Drupad's daughter is just the beginning of the gender- based limitations imposed on Draupadi in her father's palace. Panchali who emerges as a fiery character also metaphorically gives a view of the male dominated world. The life of Draupadi, a celebrated woman character of ancient India, almost reflects the modern independent woman who becomes the voice of her own. From the great seer Vyasa's version to Chitra Banerjee's , one can see remarkable differences . It is the determination and willpower in Draupadi, the spirit to fight injustice and her multifacetedness that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman for all ages.

Feminism as a theory in the evaluation of literature was well under way by the late 1960s. It is an attempt to describe women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature. It questions the subjugation, domination, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. In additions it challenges traditional and stereotypical male ideas about women and their role in society. Feminism has traveled a long distance. Divakaruni having a deep understanding of feminism writes her masterpiece **The Palace of Illusions** giving new insights to understand and interpret the events of **Mahabharata**.

By making Panchali the protagonist Divakaruni gives Panchali's own thoughts on her own life through her own words. Draupadi hears the story of her birth often by Dhai ma as it made her feel special

and unique. Though she is remarked by Dharmaraj that she was the girl who wasn't invited. The story of Panchali is the story of the assertion of female will. The opening chapters present Draupadi's obsession with her origin and introduce her rebellious character as well as her struggle for a female identity. In an instance, feminism can be felt when the tutor was teaching and Draupadi had interrupted and the tutor had said about the "women who are the path to ruin". (The Palace of Illusions 24) Draupadi says "I resented the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's trouble." (The Palace of Illusions 24) In her own house Draupadi's voice of protest, willingness to learn Nyaya Shastra, taking part in armor activities and even her right to choose her better-half were strongly opposed.

Panchali's life continues to be different from that of any other girl she knows. She falls in love not with her future husband but with Karna, who is not allowed to participate in Panchali's swayamvar. After getting married to the five pandava brothers, Panchali had to deal with the unusual struggles of life. Her life revolves round the prophecies. In an attempt to subvert the patriarchal system, Divakaruni opens up several issues and tries to interpret them through the eyes of a woman. Consequently, *The Palace of Illusions* offers Draupadi's point of view, her desire to find true love throughout her life, her disgust at her paternal house where she was sacrificed in the name of swayamvara, which in reality was nothing but a political contract, her utter helplessness when she was forced to marry all the Pandava brothers, where no one asked the question what she actually wanted, her jealousy at her husband's taking other wives, her resentment towards Kunti and her earnest yearnings of unexpressed love towards Karna. She questions the shame she experienced in Hastinapur after Yudhishthira lost everything, including Panchali in a game of dice. Panchali, disgusted that none of her husbands defend her, calls on Krishna to protect her honor.

The Palace of Illusions has a new vigour added to the epic *Mahabharata* through which Divakaruni has given voice to Panchali. The novel is definitely a feminist writing in which myths are revised, rewritten and retold from a female point of view. The focus of this novel is on the inner life of women. Traditionally Draupadi has not been given the importance she is due. Many believe that it was her headstrong actions that brought about the destruction of the Third Age of Man and she is known to be Kritika one who brings doom to her clan. But Divakaruni moves away from such interpretations to provide a new outlook on Panchali. The narrative technique of Chitra Banerjee is quite different from the original epic. She has woven myth into the structure of the novel. This strategy can be precisely told as the story within a story.

Divakaruni has not attempted anything new which was not there in Vyasa's Mahabharata but the epic has reshaped in such a way that it appeals to the modern reader. No new character has been introduced to make this epic effective. Draupadi does not plead only for outward equality for women. She disagrees with the idea that woman's duty is to offer prayer when their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons go to war. She has found some similarities between herself and Karna on the basis of strange births of both of them. She longed for him but under the spell of Krishna's words she abused Karna in the assembly of the kings but later on she regretted her doings. She put the garland into Arjuna's neck and started her journey with him and with this her problems increased by a great number, but she fights it all with great courage.

The Palace of Illusions lends to feminist interpretation as entire novel is narrated by Draupadi being a prominent character in Mahabharata, it is not simply the account of her personal life but the novel gives her take on many incidents in which she emerges out to be a powerful character. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has raised new questions about the old text of Mahabharata. She has given us the understanding of major events of the epic from a female point of view and thus the novel is not only different but also an important feminist text which gives a new perspective to the identity of Panchali.

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