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## A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

V. Abirami, R. Kavirupali & K.S. Shalini

I B.Tech. CSE

SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Tiruchirappalli

Dr. C. Shanmuga Priya

Associate Professor & Division Chair

The Division of Language, Culture and Society, The School of Social Sciences

SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Tiruchirappalli

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### ABSTRACT

This review article presents an extensive feminist reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of the Mahabharata narrated from the perspective of Draupadi. The novel foregrounds the emotional depth, complexities, desires, and struggles of Draupadi, transforming her from a peripheral mythological character to a central figure with agency and voice. Through an examination of themes such as gender inequality, emotional autonomy, patriarchal power structures, identity formation, and narrative reclamation, this article explores how the novel reconstructs the epic from a feminist standpoint. The narrative challenges traditional portrayals of women in mythology and highlights the importance of female-centered storytelling.

**Keywords:** Feminist Perspective, Transformation, Women, Mythology, Reconstruction.

### INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a transformative approach to the Mahabharata by positioning Draupadi not as a background figure but as the narrator and protagonist. This creative shift reconfigures the epic from a male-centered narrative to one that foregrounds feminine thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The novel situates Draupadi within the patriarchal framework of ancient society, offering insight into her internal conflicts as she navigates expectations placed upon her as a daughter, wife, queen, and symbolic figure. The text highlights how Draupadi's voice has historically been silenced, and the novel attempts to restore her agency through introspection, emotional honesty, and self-definition.

The narrative's first-person perspective allows readers to witness the epic through a woman's gaze, a significant deviation from traditional versions where male heroes dominate. Divakaruni's reinterpretation not only humanizes Draupadi but also critiques the gender norms embedded in both the original epic and the societal context in which it is set.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have consistently viewed *The Palace of Illusions* as a groundbreaking feminist reinterpretation. Many critics emphasize the novel's success in decentralizing male heroism and reconstructing a narrative that prioritizes female subjectivity. Researchers highlight the significance of Draupadi's narrative voice, arguing that the shift from an observer to a storyteller enables a deeper understanding of emotional and psychological dimensions absent in traditional texts.

Several studies discuss the novel's critique of the dice hall episode, often considered one of the most important moments illustrating the patriarchal objectification of Draupadi. Critics argue that the novel exposes not only the brutality of this event but also the emotional trauma and alienation that follow. Additionally, scholars examine Draupadi's relationships with her mothers-in-law, co-wives, and Dhai Ma, highlighting the complex web of female bonds and tensions shaped by patriarchal expectations. Feminist literature situates Divakaruni's reinterpretation within a larger movement of revisiting mythological stories to restore women's voices and challenge patriarchal structures in cultural narratives.

## DISCUSSION ON THEMES

One of the dominant themes of the novel is the struggle for self-identity. Draupadi is born into a world where her worth is determined by her lineage and marital alliances. Her desire to define herself beyond these roles reflects a feminist urge for individuality. Patriarchy governs every aspect of Draupadi's life from her swayamvar, which ultimately results in an arranged marriage to five men, to the continuous expectations placed upon her to uphold honor.

The novel explores how patriarchal authority restricts her autonomy, even as she attempts to resist constraints internally and emotionally. Draupadi's emotional world forms a crucial element of feminist analysis. Her unspoken love for Karna represents a rebellion against the emotional limitations placed upon her. Her relationship with her husbands further exposes how marriage often functions as a duty for women rather than a space for emotional fulfillment.

Female bonds in the novel especially with Dhai Ma serve as emotional anchors. These relationships provide a counterbalance to the failures of the patriarchal structures surrounding Draupadi. Draupadi becomes both a symbol and victim of political power. Though she influences the course of history, she is rarely allowed to shape decisions directly. This contradiction highlights how women are often burdened with the blame for events they did not control.

## INFERENCES

A feminist reading of *The Palace of Illusions* reveals a strong critique of patriarchal systems embedded in both ancient society and mythological storytelling. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi

demonstrates how women are often confined, silenced, or misrepresented. The novel restores humanity, agency, and emotional complexity to a character traditionally overshadowed by heroic male figures. The text highlights that Draupadi's struggles identity suppression, forced responsibilities, emotional sacrifices mirror challenges faced by women across cultures and eras. Through this reinterpretation, the author bridges ancient themes with contemporary feminist concerns.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Palace of Illusions* serves as a vital feminist reinterpretation that interrogates the gender inequalities pervasive in ancient narratives. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as a dynamic, flawed, emotional, and powerful woman whose voice resonates with modern readers. The novel underscores the need to revisit traditional stories through inclusive and critical lenses, emphasizing the significance of restoring women's perspectives in literature and cultural memory. The enduring relevance of the text lies in its portrayal of resistance, self-discovery, and the complexities of womanhood, making it a valuable contribution to feminist literary studies.

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