



Revitalizing the Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent Indian-American author renowned for her compelling exploration of themes such as identity, gender, and cultural displacement. Her narrative prowess and unique voice have established her as a significant figure in contemporary literature. Divakaruni's works often delve into the experiences of women navigating between traditional and modern worlds, particularly within the context of the Indian diaspora. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) exemplifies this focus by reinterpreting the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, through a feminist lens. This innovative retelling, centered on the character of Draupadi, challenges conventional narratives and offers fresh insights into the complexities of female identity. Through her writing, Divakaruni not only preserves cultural heritage but also critiques and redefines it, bridging the gap between historical and contemporary feminist perspectives.

Key Words: Gender, Patriarchal Constraints, Feminist Perspective, Identity and Self-Realization

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* presents a novel reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, spotlighting Panchaali (Draupadi) through a distinctly feminine viewpoint. The novel explores the often-overlooked inner lives of women in the epic, challenging their traditional portrayal as passive and subservient. Divakaruni critiques the male-centric focus of the original epic, which largely sidelines female characters despite their significant impact on the story. She highlights the dissatisfaction with how women like Kunti, Gandhari, and Panchaali are depicted. These characters, though pivotal, remain shadowy figures whose experiences are secondary to the male heroes' narratives. In contrast, *The Palace of Illusions* places Panchaali at the forefront, offering a detailed

and personal account of her life from birth to death, capturing her virtues and flaws.

Panchaali's story is a bildungsroman, contrasting with figures like Sita and Gandhari by portraying her as an ambitious, defiant character. Her experiences with her father, marriage, and societal expectations illustrate the broader theme of gender discrimination and the restrictive roles assigned to women. Divakaruni's work aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal structures and the societal constructs that confine women. Divakaruni speaks to Neila C. Seshachari, in an interview, "... The role for women and the structures of patriarchy that women struggled with have been very important as points of exploitation in my writings." (Divakaruni). The novel depicts Panchaali's struggle against patriarchal constraints and her quest for personal significance. Despite societal expectations to conform to traditional feminine roles, Panchaali seeks knowledge and power, challenging the gender norms of her time. Her reflections on prophecy and her father's initial rejection underscore her awareness of her unique role in history.

After examining the paintings of various kings at the Swayamvara and understanding the constraints imposed on her, Panchaali feels she has little choice in selecting her partner, ultimately having to accept the victor. Upon learning about her swayamvara, she contemplates: "Why would our father, who delighted in control, allow me so much freedom? When she gets the knowledge that there would be a test of skill (55), she asks herself, "Why even call it a swayamvara then? (56) Panchaali experiences distress and cynicism, feeling like a pawn in the hands of her father, King Drupad and subjected to male dominance. After her marriage to Arjun, she endures further humiliation and the power dynamics imposed by her mother-in-law, Kunti. Kunti's authoritative demand that Panchaali should marry all five Pandava brothers further alienates her from others. This statement offends her: "this woman, as though I were a nameless



servant. It angered me, but it also hurt” (108). The societal acceptance of polygamy and the derogatory treatment of women in such contexts are highlighted. Vyasa's boon makes Panchaali a "virgin" each time. "Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again.... Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (120). Panchaali's sense of being treated as a mere commodity is palpable, and she regrets the lack of control over her own life.

Panchaali's struggles culminate in the traumatic gambling incident where Duryodhan humiliates her, illustrating the cruel and inhumane nature of patriarchal society. To exact revenge for Panchaali's humiliating words, Duryodhan sent a male servant to her chamber to summon her to the hall, an action that Panchaali resented. : "I'm a queen, Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (190). Panchaali's experience reflects broader patterns of female subjugation across cultures, as noted by Maitreyi Krishnaraj, who emphasizes that "patriarchy has emerged as a dominant analytical concept for replanning structures of male domination and female subordination. Patriarchy as an analytic framework encompasses all the others" (3). Even in dire circumstances, Panchaali's resolve shines through as she vows vengeance against the Kauravas and refuses to bind her hair until she avenges her humiliation. This intense resolve exemplifies her resistance to the patriarchal forces that seek to subjugate her.

The Pandavas, along with Panchaali, spent twelve years in exile, concealing their identities while working in King Virat's palace. Panchaali served as a maid to Queen Sudeshna, who was targeted by the lustful Keechaka. She feels, "Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors?" (228) Keechaka's eventual death at Bheem's hands highlights Panchaali's tragic reality. Panchaali's experience with the Palace of Illusions, built by Maya, symbolizes her disillusionment. What initially seemed like a secure haven soon proved to be a mere illusion, reflecting Divakaruni's critique of the false promises of safety and security often made to women.

Divakaruni's retelling of the Mahābhārata in *The Palace of Illusions* provides a rich exploration of Panchaali's inner strength and struggles. The title itself suggests that life, much like the palace, is a series of illusions one must navigate while grappling with existential challenges.

The novel portrays Panchaali's journey as she struggles with her societal role and her multiple marriages to the Pandavas, emphasizing her quest for self-identity amid her subordination. Divakaruni's narrative, deeply rooted in the original epic, presents Panchaali's life as a continuous struggle against systemic forces. Her experiences highlight the burdens imposed on women and their efforts to assert their own space within restrictive frameworks. The novel also portrays her eventual realization of the deeper truths of existence and love, drawing from her conversations with Krishna and the lessons learned from her life's trials. As Panchaali approaches her end, she achieves a profound understanding of love and destiny. Her final moments, marked by a realization of her true self beyond societal constraints, reflect Divakaruni's broader commentary on human existence and the quest for self-understanding.

Divakaruni's narrative explores the conflict between self-worth, self-indulgence, and the quest for deeper understanding. Her reassessment of ancient ethics highlights the transformation needed for a more harmonious future, reflecting Elaine Showalter's phases of feminist consciousness: "... the feminine phase of internalization, the feminist phase of revolt and the female phase of self-discovery" (13). Women often caught between rejecting and accepting societal norms, navigate this critical stage in feminist development. Divakaruni's work plays a crucial role in articulating a new feminist perspective within modern India.

Women writers, grappling with patriarchal dominance even in literature, strive to redefine female voices and address gender-based struggles. Divakaruni's portrayal of repressive forces and the quest for female selfhood aligns with feminist theories that reveal hidden biases and patriarchal influences. Women's suppression by male dominance, as illustrated in Divakaruni's fiction, often leads them to question systemic injustices. This struggle is reflected in Showalter's concept "... the writer has opted to use the literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood" (405). Divakaruni's characters embody the diverse forms of female oppression, emphasizing the gap between traditional and contemporary perspectives.

The Palace of Illusion also reflects on the societal devaluation of female children and the pressures placed on women, illustrated by Draupadi's struggles and the societal prejudices she



faces. Her experiences, including her dark complexion and societal expectations, underscore ongoing issues of gender bias and the challenges women face in asserting their identities. Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchaali reveals her complex identity: a princess, a wife, a queen, and a devoted companion, ultimately finding her true self through her love for Karna. This reassertion of identity reflects Adrienne Rich's idea of "re-vision"—reinterpreting old texts to reveal new truths. She opines: "Re-vision, the art of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an art of survival" (35).

Panchaali's estranged state mirrors her internal struggles as she embarks on a journey to rediscover her identity. Her desires and reflections are intricately tied to her thoughts, driving her to contemplate her life's path and seek a deeper spiritual understanding. While the novel retains elements of the ancient epic, it simultaneously reflects contemporary issues, bridging the past with the future. It offers a vision of humanity's potential for change, blending mythological legacy with modern perspectives to create a commemorative narrative that honours both historical and contemporary experiences. Rama Nair holds the opinion that, "The truth of art lies in its power to inscribe new dimensions to reality" (74).

Divakaruni's feminist perspective provides a fresh and compelling reinterpretation of the Mahābhārata, emphasizing the personal and societal struggles faced by women. Panchaali should not be held accountable for straying from her true self or for the resulting pain and devastation. As Sudhir Kakar notes, "At some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at others, to an unconscious, striving for continuity of experience and yet another places as a sense of solidarity with a groups ideal" (16). "something breaks," with "a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below". She is "buoyant and expansive and uncontainable, but I always was so" and she is able to see who she is " beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego" and yet "for the first time, I am truly Panchaali" (360). As she transitions into a realm beyond mere worldly existence by blending myth and modernity, her narrative resonates with both historical and contemporary issues, offering profound insights into identity and self-realization.

The Palace of Illusions interrogates the construction of national identity through the lens of cultural memory. By revisiting the Mahabharata,

Divakaruni engages with the epic's role in forming a collective Indian identity. The epic, with its grand narratives and heroic ideals, has been instrumental in shaping cultural memory and national pride. Divakaruni's retelling, however, questions the inclusivity of these narratives and the ways in which they have been used to construct and enforce national identity. Divakaruni's Draupadi represents a marginalized voice within this national narrative, challenging the dominant historical and cultural interpretations. Her perspective introduces a more nuanced understanding of the epic's themes and questions the exclusive practices inherent in traditional readings. This approach not only redefines Draupadi's role but also prompts a reconsideration of how national identity is constructed and who gets to participate in its creation.

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