

Negotiating Myth and Modernity: A Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Sangita Maity 

Guest Faculty in English, Mahatma Gandhi University, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57067/ir.v2.i9.405>

Abstract: With the rise of the third wave of Feminism, Écriture feminine is also becoming popular as people find it interesting to know the women from a woman's perspective. So, from the last decade of the twentieth century an Indian-born-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni came with the idea to give voices to female characters in her novels like *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and many more. She aims at writing fiction which almost every woman can relate to. The voices which the patriarchal society has suppressed throughout the different ages now are being told by a woman for the women who still silently performing the role of a 'woman' in age-old stereotypical terms.

Keywords: Feminism, Écriture féminine, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suppression, Patriarchal Society, Stereotype.

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an excellent retelling of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the Indian mythological woman characters both misrepresented and misunderstood frequently. So, by giving the character voices of herself and her unique female world, the author has challenged the male-centred interpretations of the narrative. As Chitra Banerjee has mentioned her intention behind writing this novel in the author's note, she said "It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women characters that affected the action in major ways. ... But in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons." She further said, "If I ever wrote a book, I remember thinking, I would place the women

in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the man's exploits. Better still I would have her one of her tell in itself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it." And Panchaali became the best suitable woman character for the fulfilment of her desire to write such a feminist narrative. She said "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*."

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

My paper aims to discuss the necessity of the recreation, redefinition and retellings of the Indian myth with reference to *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She has successfully shaped the life of the princess of Panchaal, the daughter of the king Drupad in such a way that it becomes extremely relevant in the lives of almost every Indian

woman even in this postmodern age. She also has successfully talked of the significance of these mythical scripts, which provoke a woman to act as the society demands from her. Through the perspective of Panchaali, whose voice is ignored totally in the epic Mahabharata, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells and presents her as an extra ordinary woman. She uses the myth as an open medium to express the silent voices, silent tears and repressed emotions of women. For, the study of myths is no longer regarded as fantasy stories and fables. It is now looked as a journey in search of ontology. Myths give moral instructions and guide man to live a noble life. These are the symbolic tales of the distant past that concern cosmology and cosmogony. It holds traditional believes, cultural values, rituals and customs which lead man towards a meaningful life. They profoundly influence the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of human life, as they are believed to contain the ideal truths of humanity. In this quest for ontology, individuals often turn to the past, for it is through revisiting our origins that we find direction toward a better future.

INEQUALITIES AND SUFFERINGS:

From the very beginning of the novel, Panchaali insists that her Dhai Ma retell the story of her birth—one she has heard many times before. This story fuels her imagination and allows her to envision alternative identities for herself, names that might better reflect her unique existence: “the unexpected one” or, as Dhai Ma teasingly calls her, “the girl who wasn’t invited” (Page 1, Chapter: Fire). Even in the context of the postmodern

world, many women can relate to Panchaali’s sense of being “unexpected” and “uninvited.” At the time of her birth, her father extended his arms only to receive her brother, Dhristadyumna—although both emerged from the holy fire together, destined to “change the course of history.”

This deeply ingrained preference for male children echoes in Mahesh Dattani’s play *Tara* (1990), where the conjoined twins Tara and Chandan face gender-based discrimination. Like King Drupad, who prayed “for thirty days, from sun-up to sundown” (Page 4, Chapter: Fire) for a son to carry out his revenge against Drona, many Indian parents still project their ambitions onto male heirs, often viewing daughters as less capable of fulfilling their dreams.

These narratives also reflect the egoistic mindset often associated with patriarchal structures. Panchaali herself remarks on the gendered symbolism embedded in their names: “Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad” (Page 5). Unable to fully accept her given name, she questions, “He hadn’t been expecting me—but couldn’t my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history?”

The male ego which can also be witnessed through Dhai Ma’s words about King Drupad, “He could barely hold up his head, but of course he wouldn’t remove the monstrosity of a crown that no one has ever seen him without—not even his wives, I’ve heard, not even in bed” (Page-2). However, Chitra Banerjee is no less an intelligent woman to point out how Dhri (as

Panchaali likes to call him) was used as a means for an age-old revenge that his father sought through him. We witness this through Draupadi, when she asks Dhri, “Aren’t you giving up your entire life to get King Drupad what he wants- senseless though it is? (Page-19, Chapter-milk)” And here Divakaruni points out another harsh reality of society as men are also not free from patriarchal society’s pressure. They are also practicing the age-old role as the society expects from them, with or without realizing it. This theme resonates strongly with Mahesh Dattani’s play *Dance Like a Man* (1989), where Jayraj Parekh, a passionate Bharatanatyam dancer, faces resistance from his father, who views classical dance as unsuitable for a man. Just like Dhri, Jayraj too is pressurised to conform to traditional masculine ideals, suppressing his personal desires and individuality in the process.

RACISM:

In the second Chapter i.e.- blue (Page-4), it is also clearly witnessed that society’s discrimination based on our complexion, which prevails in our society in particular. Despite being a princess, Panchaali also became a victim of racism like all other women. “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 being slathered in skin-whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my

industrious nurse. But finally, she’d given up in despair”. Even in a postmodern society, our skin colour and our complexion hold a greater place in our lives than our personality. And that is why many businessmen are gaining profit by marketing the useless fairness cream.

EVOLUTION:

However, under the guidance of Lord Krishna, she soon realised her true strength and confidently said to herself “I, too, am beautiful” (Page-9), through which Divakaruni successfully pointed out the real strength of a strong woman is her determination, confidence and individuality. She presented Panchaali as a revolutionary figure who protests against all the injustices. Talking about the injustices she received, another instance Panchaali recalls, she was not allowed to receive the lessons from the tutor which Dhri was being offered. All she can receive from behind the curtain. Panchaali said about the tutor “He was always trying to discourage me from attending Dhri’s lessons-and he wasn’t the only one. At 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 it in the royal family of Panchaal! (Page-23, Chapter-cosmology)” Even today, we witness the challenges a woman has to face in receiving an education. She further mentions that “Even Dhai Ma, my accomplice in so many other areas of my life, regarded the lessons with misgiving. She complained that they were making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech. (Page-23)” Things,

which a woman has to face whenever she speaks or acts beyond the bars of societal norms, are still unacceptable.

RESISTANCE:

In this regard, Divakaruni portrayed another rebellious figure, Sikhandi, who decides to live her life on her own terms after her purity is being questioned by her would be husband, Salva. She protested, “If someone grasps my hand against my will, how does that make me his?” and said boldly “I’m the one who decides to whom I belong. (Page-48, Chapter-incarnations)” This is nothing but accusing the victim of being victimized. Still today, we see that in rape cases, people mark the victim as impure rather than the victimiser. Like Panchaali, like Sikhandi every woman needs to be determined in order to stand against all the injustices, a woman receives. As Panchaali said “But I was determined to learn what a king was supposed to know. (How else could I aspire to be different... How else could I be powerful in myself?) (Page-54, Chapter-fish)” It seems, Divakaruni named the first chapter of her book “fire” not only describe the birth of Royal Prince Dhristadyumna and the birth of the Princess Panchaali but also to present Panchaali as a firelike figure along with some other women figures. It seems as Simone de Beauvoir said in her book *The Second Sex* “Change your life today. Don’t gamble on the future, act now, without delay,” the same is being repeated by Divakaruni in her fantastic way of storytelling.

CASTEISM:

Karna, on the other hand also became the victim of social class and caste. In spite of being able enough to win a princess, he was being rejected and insulted in the swayamvar for his lowborn, for not having a princely identity as Dhri mentioned to Draupadi’s query of marrying Karna instead of Pandava Prince. “The honor of family is more important than other kinds of honor,” (Page-85, Chapter-scorpion) He again mentioned “Renowned though you are for your skill, Karna, my sister cannot have as her suitor a man of a low caste” (Page-94, Chapter-song) Even Draupadi said to Karna, “Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father’s name”(Page-95) The question which silenced Karna, defeated him for his lowborn without a battle. No, this is not Draupadi who rejected Karna for his low birth; rather, she developed a feeling of appreciation, a feeling of kindness, and most importantly, a feeling of passionate love for his valour and skills. This brings to make us realise the poor caste system which still prevails in our society, deprives thousands of skilful man and woman from achieving their goals even today. This is how our society lags. It is the society that compelled her to do so. She herself wished her courage to stand against society, “If I’d been wiser, I might have been able to call forth that love and, in that way, deflected the danger of the moment – a moment that would turn out to be far more important than I imagined. But I was young and afraid, and my ill-chosen words (words I would regret all my life) quenched that life forever.” (Page-97, Chapter- song)

KUNTI AND THE VERDICT AGAINST DRAUPADI:

But the one thing Draupadi realised at the day of her first visit to her in-laws' residence is the power of an exiled widowed queen over her sons even in the time of their distress. The day when Kunti asked her five sons to marry Draupadi, the sons obeyed without a single protest. Though once Arjun blunted out, "Mother, how can you ask us to do this? It's contrary to Dharma." (Page-109) But he laid no questions further. Draupadi also wanted to protest her decision but ultimately felt a grudging admiration for her. It is not that Draupadi did not want to protest for herself, for she says, "I wanted to say, I'm already married to Arjun! (Page-108, Chapter- brinjal)" However, the Pandavas presented Draupadi with only two options: her brother and her father, both of which were unfavourable to her if the marriage did not happen. Moreover, King Drupad said, "I'll send word to Vyasa, wisest of the wise," he muttered. "He knows the future as well as the past. We'll abide by his advice. (Page-119, Chapter-boon)"

In reply, "Vyasa sent a prompt verdict. I was to be married to all five brothers. (Page-119)", which only makes it clear, if Draupadi had protested, her voice would not be valued. She said, "I had no choice as to whom I slept with and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand, whether I wanted it or not. Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husband's benefit than mine. (Page-120, Chapter-boon)" She added again, "If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that

when I went to each brother, I'd be free of the memory of the previous one." It seems like women are given no choice in decision-making, even if it is about their own lives, even today. However, Panchali's engagement with the scriptures, set against the backdrop of girls confined to conventionally feminine pursuits, embodies her determination—a symbolic site of resistance where her intellectual agency unsettles the gendered prescriptions of patriarchy and envisions the possibility of transgressing its epistemic boundaries.

SYSTEMATIC MARGINALIZATION:

Furthermore, when Panchaali requested a Portrait of her prospective mother-in-law, the absence of a portrait of Kunti, as described in Chapter 10, "Births," serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader historical marginalization of women. Panchaali recounts how the artist was unable to provide her with an image of Kunti, offering instead a poorly rendered portrait of Gandhari: "The portrait was small, about a handspan square, and ill-executed, as though painted by an apprentice." This only implies that women, irrespective of class, caste, and everything they think they belong to, are the construction of the patriarchal society to subjugate them differently. Their contribution to their family and society are not worthy enough to be addressed in historical recognition. It only indicates, the treatment a woman receives from the patriarchal society is secondary and other. This systematic removal questions the inherent value systems that posit women or even men are not equal to each other, rather treating them as inferior and superior.

This systematic marginalization is not only limited to myth or literature; it goes beyond this in our contemporary society, too. To illustrate, in the Indian film industry, female characters are frequently underdeveloped and secondary to their male counterparts. Even when actresses take on lead roles, they are often paid noticeably less than their male co-stars. An injustice that a woman has to go through in various professional sectors in both representation and remuneration. As Simone de Beauvoir conceptualizes women as the “Other” in her theoretical work *The Second Sex*, defined not by their own essence, but in opposition and relation to men. The text thus critiques the cruelties of the gendered construction, highlighting their presence across both ancient narratives and modern realities.

HUMILIATION AND THE CLIMAX:

Though initially portrayed as proud and dismissive of the other wives of the Pandavas, Panchaali eventually recognizes their shared subjugation under the patriarchal structures that shape their lives. Despite their differing positions within the domestic hierarchy, these women are unified by a common status as objects within a male-dominated order. A realization that becomes painfully evident during the dice game, where Yudhishthir, the eldest of the Pandava princes, wagers and loses Panchaali to the Kauravas, reducing her to a mere commodified object.

Her public humiliation, the climax of the narrative, happened when no one, not even her five husbands, protested against such illegitimate conduct by the Kauravas.

Panchaali's subsequent rage and refusal to remain silent mark a radical shift in the narrative. Her curse on the Kuru dynasty becomes a symbolic act of resistance, initiating the Kurukshetra War and thereby establishing her power and autonomy over the patriarchy. This also highlights a patriarchal society cannot safeguard women's dignity and liberation; rather, they must emerge through women's own empowerment and mutual support.

TASTE OF THE EMPOWERMENT:

However, in the chapter “Palace,” Draupadi's naming of the newly built Khandav palace reflects a deeper truth: whenever a woman stands up for herself and her self-respect, she often earns the support and admiration of others, even in a man-created world. This is evident as the Pandava brothers not only include Draupadi in the decision-making process but also ask for her wishes on the palace's design and naming. It is she who named the Khandav palace- “The Palace of Illusions”. The palace, where she had successfully gained every importance, she had been desiring since her birth. Thereby, Divakaruni is also successful in selecting the title of the narrative.

AUTONOMY AND GOVERNANCE:

Following the war, Panchaali articulates her own realization in creating a different society. She fabricated a separate court for women—a space where the voices and grievances of the war turned widows and other war-affected women are not only heard but legitimized. She envisions a society in which women occupy

public governance and exercise autonomy by creating an empowered Hastinapur. As Divakaruni noted in Chapter-ash, ‘Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment’ (p. 325).

SELF-DIGNITY:

However, Panchaali’s resistance reaches its utmost height in her decision to accompany her husbands on their final death journey—an act that signifies both her deep loyalty and bold disobedience. This also clearly emphasizes that women’s empowerment does not necessitate a rejection of love or humility toward male counterparts; rather, it challenges the notion of forced submission within patriarchal frameworks. Empowerment, as embodied by Panchaali, lies in the freedom to choose—whether to resist, to love, or to follow—on one’s own terms. Through Panchaali, Divakaruni portrays a woman’s evolution from commodification to resistance and resistance to a position of moral and emotional leadership. She also illustrates how women’s collective effort can reimagine cultural memory and transform socio-political realities into action. Thus, “women” are no longer a construction of “men”, even through, from the word “men”; rather, they can be treated as “wow-men”.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni effectively articulated the standing injustices not only present in the age-old mythologies, literature but also in the contemporary Indian society through a distinctly female

perspective. She lends voice to the silenced and suppressed, not only through the reimagined character of Draupadi but also through other historically overlooked major and minor characters. Through this unconventional narrative strategy, Divakaruni reconstructs these characters as empowered agents who embody the power to challenge patriarchal conventions and traditions, offering a minute critique of gender construction and power dynamics across time in both myth and modernity.

WORKS CITED:

Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 293.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador, 2008, pp. 1–342.

Puri, S. G. “Replication of the Cultural Scripts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*.” *Contemporary Literary Review India*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2015, p. 1.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Tara: A Play in Two Acts*. Orient Blackswan, 1995.
<https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/engp09/chapter/mahesh-dattani-tara/>

Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Marx, Karl (1867). "Chapter 1, Section 3: The Form of Value or Exchange-Value, Part 4 The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof". Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1. Progress Press, Moscow – via Marxists Internet Archive.