

“PORTRAYAL OF MALE CHARACTERS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKURNI’S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*”

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel, “The Palace of Illusions,” offers a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on portraying male characters within the context of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata. In this retelling, the author places Draupadi at the center of the narrative, allowing readers to explore the male figures of the epic through her discerning eyes. The portrayal of these male characters, including Drupada, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Arjuna, Bhishma, and Krishna, reveals a depth and complexity not often found in traditional retellings. Arjuna, conventionally seen as the heroic archer, is portrayed with a rich tapestry of emotions, fears, and vulnerabilities, humanizing his character. Bhishma, the patriarch, takes on shades of moral ambiguity as Divakaruni delves into the inner turmoil of his choices and the conflicts that arise from his vows. Krishna, the enigmatic divine, retains his mystique but is presented with moments of vulnerability that provide readers with a more relatable portrayal of his character. The reinterpretation of these male characters challenges traditional gender roles and emphasizes the importance of diverse perspectives in literature. By encouraging a deeper understanding of the complexities of human nature and the moral dilemmas these iconic characters face, Divakaruni’s work serves as a reminder of the power of reinterpretation in literature. It underscores the enduring relevance of classical narratives in the modern world and inspires readers to explore the intricate interplay between characters, morality, and the human experience.

Keywords: - Divakurni, Krishna, Patriarchy, Retellings, Male Characters.

**PORTRAYAL OF MALE CHARACTERS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKURNI'S
*THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS***

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Introduction: -

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "*The Palace of Illusions*" is a captivating retelling of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, narrated from the perspective of Draupadi, also known as Panchaali. While much of the focus on the *Mahabharata* has traditionally revolved around its male characters, Divakaruni's novel shifts the narrative lens, uniquely portraying the male figures in this epic. Portraying male characters in a female-centric novel is a critical aspect of storytelling, as it can significantly impact the narrative's depth and thematic exploration. In such novels, the male characters often serve as mirrors, allies, antagonists, or catalysts for the female protagonist's growth and development. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's portrayal of male characters in her female-centric novels is a deliberate narrative choice. It enriches the storytelling, contributes to thematic exploration, and provides readers with a more complete and relatable experience of the worlds she creates. These male characters are not simply accessories but integral to her works' overarching message and purpose. This article delves into how Divakaruni's reinterpretation adds depth and complexity to characters such as Drupada, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Arjuna, Bhishma, and Krishna. In "*The Palace of Illusions*" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a retelling of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, the male characters play significant roles that shed light on various aspects of patriarchy.

Drupada: The Ambitious King: -

Drupada, in the novel, is known for his ambition and the desire to reclaim his kingdom. This ambition drives his actions and interactions with other characters. Drupada, the father of Draupadi, exemplifies patriarchal ideals. He organizes a contest to choose the groom for his daughter, reinforcing the notion of women as property to be won. He symbolizes

patriarchy's control and ownership of women's lives and choices. He thinks about himself at the point when he should have to think about Draupadi. When he said: -

“Perhaps in Hastinapur such behavior's considered honorable, but here in Kampilya men will call Draupadi a whore! And if I should hand her over to the five of you, what will they call me? Perhaps death is a better alternative.”¹ (Divakurni 118)

It shows how Drupada thinks about his reputation and pride, leaving Draupadi's situation and her pain. Drupad organizes a contest to choose Draupadi's Groom, treating her as a prize to be won. It aligns with the patriarchal tradition of arranged marriages, where women's choices and agency are often subordinated to the decisions made by their male family members. By organizing the contest, Drupad reinforces the notion of women as objects of exchange within the Patriarchal system. Drupad sees Draupadi as his property and seeks to control her life and destiny. This perspective reflects the patriarchal idea of women as Possessions, where fathers and husbands hold authority over them. Drupad's desire to protect his honour by choosing Draupadi's husband illustrates the patriarchal Expectation of male dominance and control over women's lives and sexuality. Drupad's actions contribute to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. By Organizing the contest, he reinforces the belief that men are active participants in society while women are passive recipients of male choices and decisions.

It perpetuates the idea that women's primary role is to serve and support men rather Than pursue their aspirations and desires. Despite Draupadi's objections, Drupad insists on proceeding with the contest and chooses Arjuna as her husband. It disregards Draupadi's agency and autonomy, reflecting the patriarchal norm of diminishing women's voices and disregarding their desires. Drupad's actions Prioritize societal expectations and uphold the patriarchal order, denying Draupadi The right to choose her life path. Through Drupad's character, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchy and its effects on women's lives. Drupad's actions reflect the systemic inequality and control that patriarchal structures impose on women, limiting their agency, choices, and self-determination.

Dhritrashtra: The Blind Monarch: -

The character of Dhritrashtra is depicted in a way that reflects the influence and Consequences of patriarchy. Dhritrashtra, the blind King and father of the Kauravas embodies several aspects of patriarchy. Dhritrashtra's position as the King and head of the Kuru dynasty symbolizes his patriarchal authority. He exercises power over his subjects, including his family, reinforcing That men are entitled to dominate and rule. Dhritrashtra's intense desire for a biological heir demonstrates the patriarchal obsession with lineage and male Succession. His blindness serves as a metaphor for his inner blindness to the needs and aspirations of others, as he prioritizes the continuation of his bloodline over the Well-being of his kingdom. Dhritrashtra consistently favours his sons, the Kauravas, over their cousins, the Pandavas. This favouritism stems from his Patriarchal mindset, where male children are given preference and entitlement. His Bias contributes to the conflicts and eventual war between the two factions, Showcasing the destructive consequences of patriarchal favouritism. Dhritrashtra's treatment of his wife, Gandhari, illustrates the oppressive nature of patriarchy. He Exercises control over her by dictating her actions and decisions, such as covering Her eyes with a blindfold to share his blindness. This act symbolizes the restriction Placed on women's autonomy and agency within patriarchal structures. However, it is worth noting that Dhritrashtra's character also exhibits complexities and Internal conflicts. His love for his sons often conflicts with his sense of morality, as He recognizes their wrongdoings but fails to take decisive action. This internal struggle highlights the internalized nature of patriarchy and its influence on Individuals, even when they may have moments of introspection and moral Dilemmas. As Sourajeet Pradhani writes about Dhritrashtra:

“Like all great men, Dhritrashtra compensated his liability by focusing on his strengths. The aspect of Dhritrashtra, which is unknown to most people, is that he was precociously strong, knew the art of warfare and possessed high standards of political acumen. Although blind, being the eldest son, he always believed that the throne belonged to him. Apart from ‘visual sight’, he acquired everything he could to be a good king.”² (Pradhani)

Duryodhana: The Unyielding Adversary: -

Duryodhana, one of the primary antagonists in the *Mahabharata*, can be analysed concerning patriarchy. Duryodhana embodies certain patriarchal traits and behaviours, reflecting the oppressive nature of the system. Duryodhana is portrayed as someone with a strong sense of entitlement. He believes he deserves power, privilege, and the throne simply by his birthright as the eldest Kaurava Prince. This sense of entitlement mirrors the patriarchal belief that men inherently Deserve positions of authority and dominance based on gender. Duryodhana Reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations throughout the story. He expects women to conform to their assigned roles, focusing on domestic duties and Submission to male authority. His treatment of Draupadi during the dice game and Subsequent humiliation highlights his disregard for women's autonomy and his Willingness to subjugate them for his gain. Duryodhana is known for his Manipulative tactics and desire for control. He constantly schemes to undermine his cousins, the Pandavas, and attempts to assert dominance over them. This desire for control aligns with patriarchal norms prioritizing male dominance and control over others, particularly women. Duryodhana objectifies women, considering them mere possessions or tools for his purposes. He views Draupadi as an object to be won in the dice game, disregarding her agency and dignity. This objectification reflects the objectifying nature of patriarchy, where women are often Reduced to their physical attributes or treated as objects of desire. Duryodhana's Aggressive and violent nature is another reflection of patriarchal tendencies. He Resorts to warfare and conflict to assert his dominance and enforce his ideals. His belief in physical strength and aggression as markers of power aligns with patriarchal notions that valorise violence to establish control. By portraying Duryodhana's character in this way, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchy. Duryodhana's Actions and beliefs serve as a cautionary example, illustrating the detrimental Effects of patriarchal ideologies on individuals and society.

Arjuna: The Flawed Hero: -

Arjuna, one of the central figures in the *Mahabharata*, is often portrayed as a heroic and skilled warrior. His legendary archery skills and unwavering dedication to dharma have

made him an iconic character in Indian mythology. However, Divakaruni's portrayal of Arjuna goes beyond these conventional attributes. She presents him as a flawed hero, haunted by self-doubt and personal insecurities. In the novel, Arjuna's internal conflicts and moments of vulnerability humanize him in a way that the traditional epic does not. This reinterpretation adds layers to his character and invites readers to empathize with the emotional turmoil he experiences. Arjuna, one of the central characters from the *Mahabharata*, also reflects certain aspects of patriarchy. As a male character, Arjuna is bound by the societal expectations of masculinity prevalent in a patriarchal society. He embodies the idealized image of a warrior, with physical strength and powers being highly valued. Arjuna's identity is primarily defined by his martial skills, emphasizing the patriarchal notion that men should be strong, aggressive, and dominant. Arjuna enjoys certain privileges as a male character within the story. He is the favoured son of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, and this favouritism indicates the gender bias ingrained in patriarchy. Arjuna's status as a male gives him advantages and opportunities that his female counterparts, such as Draupadi, do not have. Arjuna's marriage to Draupadi is an example of the polygamous practices prevalent in the epic and reflects the patriarchal institution of marriage. Despite Draupadi's initial reluctance, she is shared amongst all the Pandava brothers, highlighting the male entitlement and control over women's bodies that patriarchy can perpetuate. Arjuna not only married Draupadi, but living in a patriarchal society and accepting those patriarchal mindsets, he also married Ulupi, Chitrangada, and Subhadra; it shows how men in a patriarchal society are allowed to have more wives not because they love but because of sexual wants or only because of attraction of female body. Arjuna's role as a hero and warrior necessitates adhering to certain patriarchal expectations. He is expected to be brave, valiant, and stoic, displaying traits associated with traditional masculinity. These expectations often limit emotional expression and can suppress vulnerability and empathy, reinforcing rigid gender roles. While Arjuna embodies certain patriarchal ideals, his character also showcases moments of internal conflict and questioning of established norms. He is troubled by moral dilemmas and ethical concerns, demonstrating his capacity for introspection and empathy. Arjuna's moments of doubt and reflection provide glimpses of the potential for transformation and resistance within the

Constraints of patriarchy. It is essential to recognize that Arjuna's character, like the Other male characters in the story, is shaped by the patriarchal context of the *Mahabharata*.

Bhishma: The Complex Patriarch: -

Bhishma, the patriarch of the Kuru family, is another character who undergoes a profound transformation in Divakaruni's narrative. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma is often seen as unwaveringly noble and selfless, bound by his vow of celibacy and loyalty to the throne. However, in "*The Palace of Illusions*," Divakaruni presents Bhishma as a more complex figure. She explores the emotional and psychological burdens of his choices, highlighting the inner turmoil he experiences due to his oath of celibacy and his role in the great war. This portrayal underscores the complexity of duty, ethics, and personal sacrifice.

Krishna: The Enigmatic Divine: -

Krishna, Arjuna's divine figure and charioteer, is a central character in the *Mahabharata*, revered for his wisdom and guidance. In "*The Palace of Illusions*," Krishna retains his enigmatic and mystical qualities, but Divakaruni's portrayal adds a human touch to his character. Readers are presented with a more relatable Krishna who experiences moments of vulnerability and doubt. This reinterpretation invites readers to explore the intricate interplay between Krishna's divine wisdom and human emotions. Shri Krishna is a divine advisor and guide to the protagonist, Draupadi (Panchaali). He imparts wisdom, guidance, and foresight to her and other characters, helping them navigate their challenges. His divine insights often shape the course of events in the story.

Krishna's enigmatic nature and divine attributes make him a compelling and central character in the novel. He serves as a guiding force for Draupadi and the Pandavas, offering wisdom and counsel while playing a crucial role in the epic's overarching narrative. The title "The Enigmatic Divine" encapsulates his character's multifaceted role and the sense of wonder and reverence that surrounds him in the story.

Themes and Implications: -

These male characters' unique portrayals contribute to the novel's overarching themes. "*The Palace of Illusions*" delves into themes of destiny, duty, and personal choice, examining

how these themes shape the characters' lives, particularly the male figures. Arjuna's internal struggles, Bhishma's internal conflicts, and Krishna's duality between human and divine all provide a lens through which readers can contemplate these timeless themes. Divakaruni's retelling underscores the complexity of human nature and the moral ambiguities that arise in pursuing dharma. It challenges readers to reevaluate their perceptions of the characters and reflect on the shades of grey within the epic's traditionally black-and-white moral landscape. As she depicts:

“Perhaps Krishna and I got along so well because 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.”³
(Divakaruni 8)

Divakaruni's portrayal of the male characters in “*The Palace of Illusions*” holds cultural and societal significance. By offering a fresh and multifaceted view of these iconic figures, she encourages readers to question traditional gender roles and expectations, especially in the context of ancient Indian mythology. Her work can be seen as part of a broader movement that seeks to challenge and subvert traditional narratives, inviting readers to consider the complexity of these male characters from a feminist perspective.

“*The Palace of Illusions*” has been well-received by readers and critics, not only for its unique narrative perspective but also for its portrayal of male characters. Divakaruni's reinterpretation has sparked discussions about reimagining classical texts and the value of diverse perspectives in literature. Her portrayal of male figures has been praised for its depth and humanity, providing readers with a more relatable and emotionally resonant view of these iconic characters. The novel has contributed significantly to the ongoing dialogue on the importance of diverse voices in literature and ancient narratives' capacity to adapt to contemporary society's changing values and sensibilities.

Conclusion: -

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's “*The Palace of Illusions*” is a testament to the transformative power of reinterpretation in literature. Through her portrayal of male characters in the

Mahabharata, she offers readers a fresh perspective on these iconic figures, challenging conventional narratives and emphasizing the complexity of human nature. This novel serves as a reminder that classic epics can be reinvigorated with new viewpoints, making them more relevant and thought-provoking in today's world. In her work, Divakaruni encourages readers to explore the intricacies of human experiences and question the roles of male characters in ancient narratives. She presents these characters not as mere archetypes but as multifaceted individuals with their dilemmas, fears, and vulnerabilities. This fresh perspective challenges readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about characters and narratives, reaffirming the enduring power of literature to inspire thought and discussion.

"*The Palace of Illusions*" demonstrates the potential for storytelling to evolve and adapt while retaining the essence of a classic tale. It offers a lens through which we can appreciate and understand the male characters of the Mahabharata from a new vantage point, enriching our comprehension of the epic and its eternal themes. Divakaruni's reinterpretation calls upon readers to engage more deeply with these iconic characters, reshaping our perspectives on an age-old narrative.

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