

**A FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF MAHABHARATHA – CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S PALACE OF ILLUSIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to note the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Women's presentation in the present era is more assertive, they are more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is. Feminism in Indian English novels is not at all a new-fangled concept and over the years many new writers have broken into the literary circuit and have successfully created a reader base. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the best known Indian writers who have feminist ideology. Among her famous works is *The Palace of Illusions*. This book is Mahabharata told from the perspective of Draupadi. Relevant to today's war-torn world, *The Palace of Illusions* takes the readers back to a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical. *The Palace of Illusion* gives new voice to Panchaali, the fire-born heroine of the *Mahabharata*, as she weaves a vibrant interpretation of an ancient tale. Married to five royal husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom, Panchaali aids and is swept in their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. But she cannot deny her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna-or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband's most dangerous enemy-as she is caught up in the ever-manipulating hands of fate. Through her narrator Panchaali, the wife of the legendary five Pandavas brothers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives the readers a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story. The novel traces Panchaali's life, beginning with her magical birth in fire as the daughter of a king before following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Panchaali, Self-Asserting Women, Delineation of Inner Life

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English is now gaining ground rapidly. In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels both at home and abroad. The likes of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Gosh and Anita Desai have won worldwide acclaim for the quality of their writing and their imaginative use of English. These include the role of English as global lingua franca: the position of English in India. The Indian writers in English are writing, not in their native language but in a second language, and the resultant transcultural character of their texts. Indian Women writing in English is being recognised as major contemporary issue current in English language-Literature. Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors

contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Indian Women Writers in English are victims of a second prejudice-their regional counterparts. The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated women. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women.

Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. Today, the works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centred approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. The theme is from childhood to womanhood-developed society respecting women in general.

Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to note the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Women's presentation in the present era is more assertive, they are more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is.

Feminism in Indian English novels is not at all a new-fangled concept and over the years many new writers have broken into the literary circuit and have successfully created a reader base. Indian women writers, composing their thoughts in English range from an array of people like Toru Dutt and Kamala Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy to Shashi Deshpande. These female Indian writers tell the astonishing variety of theme, in a style, that poetry and novels are capable of offering. After absorbing a variety of influences in the last fifty years, after dealing with an array of themes and thoughts, a diverse strata of poetic and literary expressions had been created. Each writer, in her own way, has tried to convey her thoughts in a distinct personal voice, yet these writers have been successful in forming a part of the chorus, a collective tone emphasizing the sovereignty of women. It must be kept in mind that literary creation by women need not be conceived only as feminist creation. Women writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural principles that constrained their liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women. In most cases the write ups are written in a confessional and personal note, where their composition acts as a social document as they are themselves sufferers and also agents of social revolution. Breaking the norms of popular trends in literary narrative, the women writers, along with the simultaneous assimilation of Pan-Indian elements, have made their creativity a formidable area of study and research.

The history of Indian English novel, a journey which began long back has witnessed a lot of alteration to gain today's chic contour. The novels include various concepts of fact and fiction and are based on current events and recent social problems. Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet, activist and teacher. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth, and the joys and

challenges of living in a multicultural world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the best known Indian writers who have feminist ideology. Among her famous works is *The Palace of Illusions*. This book is Mahabharata told from the perspective of Draupadi. Relevant to today's war-torn world, *The Palace of Illusions* takes the readers back to a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical. *The Palace of Illusion* gives new voice to Panchaali, the fire-born heroine of the *Mahabharata*, as she weaves a vibrant interpretation of an ancient tale. Married to five royal husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom, Panchaali aids and is swept in their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. But she cannot deny her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna-or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband's most dangerous enemy-as she is caught up in the ever-manipulating hands of fate. Through her narrator Panchaali, the wife of the legendary five Pandavas brothers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives the readers a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story. The novel traces Panchaali's life, beginning with her magical birth in fire as the daughter of a king before following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, is an interpretation of the events of the Hindu epic Mahabharata through the lens of the woman married to the five Pandava brothers, the greatest heroes of their time-Panchaali. The novel is written in first person, giving Panchali's own thoughts on her own life. Though popularly known as Draupadi (literally meaning daughter of Drupad), she quickly reasserts herself and renames herself Panchaali (meaning from the Kingdom of Panchaala), rejecting the egoistic name her father gave her and refusing to believe that her identity was to be bound by the men in her life.

Draupadi has been portrayed mostly negatively in Hindu society. Many believe that it was her headstrong actions that brought about the destruction and she is known to be a *kritya*, one who brings doom to her clan. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni moves away from such interpretations to provide a new outlook on Panchaali. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Panchaali as a powerful, strong, and independent woman, an equal to the men around her rather than subservient. She presents Panchaali's life as a series of choices made by Panchaali, and not the people around her, giving her a voice in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society that was ancient India. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's interpretation of the epic provides a complete narrative, sometimes missing from the original epic, giving a stronger role to the women of the story, and portraying them as equals in society.

Though Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives women an equal status in society, showing them to be more than just daughters, mothers and wives of great heroes of the epic *Mahabharata*, the injustices borne by the female protagonists constantly remind the reader that no matter how much women assert their roles in society, if men believe that they are superior to women, equality will not prevail. Parallels from Panchaali's story can be made to events from contemporary Indian society that show the readers that though it has been almost three thousand years since the events of the *Mahabharata* unfolded, the society has not come much further in terms of the way women are treated. Take Panchaali's fate after her husband loses her to his opponent in a game of dice. Her husband, after wagering (and losing) everything he owned, his brothers, and himself, wagers his wife, Panchaali. After he loses her too, his opponent tries to harass her by removing her sari. Though her prayers are answered and the sari becomes infinitely long, no one present in the court attempts to save her from this act of sexual harassment. Laxmi Oraon was, however, not as lucky as Panchaali. In 2007, Oraon, a tribal woman, was rallying for better tribal rights in the north-east Indian state of Assam, when she was stripped naked and beaten by a violent mob, as others looked on at the incident as if it were a spectacle. Numerous other cases of

eve-teasing are proof that many women are still subjected to the same public sexual harassment that Panchaali suffered. Though Panchaali was never raped, she received more than enough of her share of unwanted advances by men, a phenomenon that seems to be prevalent even in today's society. While reading the novel, it was easy to relate to such events in Panchaali's life, and while she was courageous enough to fight off her offenders, nowadays such instances are so common that most women's instincts are to ignore such advances. Though numerous years and generations separate contemporary life from Panchaali's, her life's events are surprisingly similar to the many trials and tribulations faced by today's women.

Though the focus is on Panchaali's life, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is careful to include the stories of the other strong female characters, not just as Panchaali's rivals, but also as strong role-models (for Panchaali and others alike). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays, at length, the story of Kunti, Panchaali's mother-in-law, who devoted her life to the upbringing of her own sons and the sons of her husband's second wife, making sure to treat them all equally, and grooming them to become kings. She also mentions the story of Gandhari, the wife of the blind king Dhritarashtra, who blindfolds herself at her marriage, choosing to live as an equal to her husband, surrendering her power as a queen and mother. What makes Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel compelling and above other interpretations is that she portrays the stories of all these women as conscious choices made by them, not as roles handed to them by society or by the men in their lives. These women chose the lives that they lived, and did not simply walk into them. To give the women of ancient India such power and freedom is phenomenal.

The original epic was about gods, demi-gods, kings, princes, warriors, and other noble men. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's interpretation provides a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, more relatable, and more personal. *The Palace of Illusions* is an intimate, feminine portrait that is both contemporary and timeless; an ambitious project effectively executed. It is a lyrical tale imbued with the scent of ancient incense yet rooted in modern day relevancy. *The Palace of Illusions* is a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honour and humiliation. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a sprawling and bright gem—a mythic tale brimming with warriors, magic and treachery which is an attempt at the feat of transforming a centuries-old cultural icon into a personal, modern story. Panchaali's narrative provides a radiant entry into an ancient mythology virtually unknown to the Western world. *The Palace of Illusions* is Divakaruni's impulse to flesh out the women of the Mahabharat. *The Palace of Illusions* is a truly epic narrative myth that calls for bitter experience descending, avalanche-like, down dynasties, incorporating dramatic turning points of ineradicable impact; curses; looming fates; tricky and meddlesome gods; feuds; sages, sorcerers and wars. It is vivid and inventive, rich, action-filled, and complex.

For more than 20 years now, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been telling stories of Indian women from her home in California. Her women are desperate, wonderful, complicated, lyrical, memorable, even magical. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's women experience love, loss and longing through tangled marriages, bitter divorces, childbirth, abortion, abuse, violence, racism, poverty and riches. In this daring novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni returns to a fantastic world, inhabited by kings, queens, villains and sorcerers. *The Palace of Illusions* is a reimagining of the world-famous Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, told from the point of view of the wife of five men. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni succeeds in creating an intimate, feminine portrait that is both contemporary and timeless.

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