

**The Study of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions***

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English  
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### **Declaration**

I declare that the work presented in the Dissertation entitled “The Study of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Palace of Illusions*” being submitted to the Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun for the award of Bachelor in (English) is my original research work. The Dissertation embodies the results of qualitative research carried out by me. I have neither plagiarized any part of the dissertation nor have submitted same work for the award of any other degree/diploma anywhere.

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SLE 1079

### Certificate

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled “The Study of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Palace of Illusions*” submitted by Ms. Tamanna Negi has been done under my supervision. It is also certified that the work in this Dissertation embodies original research and hard work of the candidate.

The assistance and support received during the course of investigation and all the sources of literature have been fully acknowledged.

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### **Abstract**

This research work deals with study of rewriting of the epic Mahabharata by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as the *Palace of Illusion*. It analyses its female characters from a feminist perspective. The work is a sincere attempt to explore the living conditions of these women as re- interpreting them and voicing them out through theory. These women are the victims of freedom, rights, individuality and sexual harassment. The novel depicts the plight of ancient women. It shows a women's courageous personality and their will power to exist equally and contentedly while taking over their basic rights.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The richest element of Indian culture is its mythology, enriching it and making it a unique tale of myths and legends in the world. The term "Hindu mythology" is used by modern scholars to refer to ancient Indian literature concerning historically important details about deities, god, goddess, people, places, kings, lifestyle, incarnations, sages and so forth. Hinduism has evolved over millennia and includes concepts and stories from many eras and cultures. Indian mythological stories range from the subtle maxims that tell the story of the Panchatantra and Jataka stories to the two major works of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The origin of the concept of God in Indian religion is during 2000 B.C. and 1200 B.C. after the settlement of the nomadic Central Asians known as Aryans. They came from Iran

with the gods and emigrated to northern India. Their 'Vedic' Gods — the Devas — were mostly nature deities. Hinduism has the concept of the Trinity (Three gods). Brahma, Vishnu, Śiva. Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the Conservator, and Śiva is the Destroyer.

In Hinduism, Brahma is the "Supreme Cosmic Spirit" of the universe. Brahma is considered as the god of wisdom and has four heads. He is the creator of the universe and all beings, as depicted in Hindu cosmology and is considered the Father of Dharma because the four Veda ( Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Athrava Veda, Yajur Veda), that are the oldest and holiest Hindu scriptures, which is narrated from each of the four faces with four heads.

God Vishnu is the guardian or maintainer of life and is known for the unwavering principles of order, justice and truth. When these values are threatened and there is turmoil in the world., Vishnu emerges from his transcendence to restore peace and order in Earth. He is best known for his ten avatars (Incarnations). Lord Shiva is probably the most complex and powerful Hindu deities. He is believed to be the God of power, meditation and dance. Shiva is "Shakti" or power. The three eyed God represents the sun, moon and fire with his right, middle and left eyes, respectively. Shiva is thought to be at the center of the centrifugal force of the universe because it is the cause of death and destruction. Unlike the creator Brahma and the preserver Vishnu, Shiva is the dissolving power of life. Because death is necessary to regenerate into a new life. So, creation and destruction are both in his character.

Two famous works that are very important part of ancient Indian epic literature are Ramayana and Mahabharat. Written in ancient Sanskrit, these two classical Indian epics represent the most common ideals of human civilization, which in modern times seem abandoned such as the value of truth, the importance of sacrifice, etc. Indian epics are loaded with moral teachings and sacred sermons that are also relevant to life today.

Sage Valmiki wrote the Ramayana centuries ago. It is known as a treatise on Dharma. Four Purusharthas - The values of life, namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha, are



treated with great care here. It tells the tale of Lord Rama, who was exiled for 14 years with his brother and his wife. He fights Lanka's demon king Ravana, who kidnapped his wife Sita. The epic is full of morals and thought-provoking concepts that make you realize the significance of being honest constantly and in no way deter from the direction of good. It embodies the obligations of relationship. Through the portrayal of characters like the ideal father, the ideal servant, the ideal wife, the ideal brother and the ideal king, it embodies the obligations and duties of relationships.

Mahabharata covers most of the mythical and didactic material which is placed around a central heroic story that tells the struggle for jurisdiction between two groups of cousins, Kauravas (son of Dhritarashtra, descendant of Kuru) and Pandavas (son of Pandu). The Mahabharata is an epic about life that describes the fact that life is a journey and its meaning is in the practice of the Dharma. It contains the meaning of the four Vedas. It contains the essence of decay, death, fear, illness, existence and non-existence, descriptions of beliefs and narratives of various ways of life. The Mahabharata emphasizes the inevitability of the suffering caused by the violence to which man must endure, while God Himself allow such bloodshed to occur for the sake of maintaining the laws and orders in the world.

The great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, provide the many stories and short stories that constitute India's richest treasury of narration. In addition to providing a multitude of stories, they provide a general concept of fictional resources that appeal to the Indian spirit. The Ithihasa or epic narrative has a special importance in the Indian narrative tradition, in which the human element prevails over any other narrative mode. Human choice has a lot to do with these stories. They cover all areas of human psychology and address many intellectual and ethical questions. These features of the epic offer many possibilities for storytelling. Indian literature has given a makeover to many epics by retelling them according to different cultures, providing new nuances, adding new characters and stories, and changing the composition itself.

Indian epics have been retold by many writers, including native and foreign versions. These stories have been influenced by prevailing cultural, social and political trends. They help study the epic from various angles and animate different characters that have been marginalized by mainstream literature. Efforts to clean up and standardize epics and make them central to religion were made; however, feminist narratives or stories told from a gender perspective often get with this. This may be in partly explained through the fact that those works are perceived as works of ancient or literary fiction in preference to severely demolishing the original variations of the text. Myths have always been the source of collective male fantasies. The author of these great epics has mythologized female characters. But lately, many female writers have chosen to challenge well established mythological structures. They told these stories from a feminist perspective to keep women as a central character of the story.

Manu, the author of Manusmriti, believes that women deserve to be at the bottom of the social and family system. There have been countless female characters in the Indian Puranas and Ithihasa being treated arbitrarily. Female characters are often used as a tool to move the story forward or are presented as the reason for the disaster so that the male characters remain innocent of any bloodshed caused. There are also cases of mythical women used as examples of virtues for women to follow or examples of evils to be avoided. In fact, the women of the myth were presented as a lesson to the women who read it.

According to the Mahabharata women are not supposed to ridicule men, for the eighteen days of Kurukshetra War was only caused because Draupadi had the courage to make fun of Duryodhana who had already been humiliated by the illusion of the newly built Pandavas palace. Ithihasa also tells readers that women cannot keep secrets because Kunti is cursed by her son for keeping such a terrible secret, the disclosure of which would prevent the whole fight. Aditya Purana is about a woman who lived so chastely that she took her leper husband to a prostitute to fulfil his wish. Her chastity and devotion to her husband made

her so powerful that she could control the sun's path. Matsyagandhi was rewarded with a perfume after satisfying Veda Vyasa's wish. There are countless cases where women were required to follow patriarchy in order to be rewarded.

However, there has been an advancement in mythological writers in the country who have brought these mythical women to life and told their stories that have been ignored for a long time. *Yagnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* by Prathibha Ray tells the story of Draupadi, who is commanded by his stepmother to live with five brothers. *Palace of Illusions* is another novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that tells about the deepest aspects of Draupadi's mind. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* by Kavitha Kane offers a perspective on a relatively under-discussed topic female character from Mahabharata. *The Rise of Hastinapur* describes the life of Amba, another woman overlooked in Mahabharata.

Devdutt Pattanaik, who, in his book titled *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling*, wrote the Ramayana from Sita's perspective to give her the necessary voice she deserves. Another kind of feminist retelling is evident in the works of Mahashweta Devi; one of the stories in her book *After Kurukshetra*, titled *Kunti and the Nishadin*, brings in the narratives of women marginalized owing to caste and class locations. Alternative stories with a feminist perspective that explore gender and sexuality have scope to create new space for previously repressed voices and feminists who have make use of this space through various stories

Very often it has been seen that the stance of the female characters is disregarded in the narration of Indian epics and the description of events cannot provide the necessary space for further study of their psychology. Indian women have long been enclosed by the suffering and misery of the conventional society. The image of Sita as a committed wife and Draupadi as possession is enduring, and feminist stories that go beyond narrative and static imagery are secondary to feminism.

As it can be seen clearly, in the Ramayana, because of her husband's suspicions, Sita has to go into exile, give birth and raise her sons by herself and even after these assessments just to prove her innocence, she needs another male character to protect her.

Like-wise The Mahabharata, is loaded with the ill-treatment of female's selfhood and independence, where a wife, compelled to be distributed among five brothers, is stalked and sold in gambling.

As a result, many retold versions of these mythologies have emphasized the lives of epic female characters, presenting events from their perspective to reveal aspects of "truth" which is lost in the narrative.

The stories of the epics enriched the Indian narrative with the elasticity of structure and the fluidity and flexibility of the narrative. This makes it special in the history of literature, where the reader is given the liberty to read and continue to tell the text as he pleases. By adding new nuances to the stories formerly told, these stories have enriched the Indian storytelling tradition.

Contemporary writers try to convey the unexpressed views of characters that differ from the original story. The modernization of Indian mythology has become more accessible to the modern audience. In today's identity-consciousness, liberal society, patriarchal traditions, value systems, and aesthetics are deliberately undermined or questioned by feminist thinkers, theorists, and authors through their writings, dialogues and debates.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born Chitrlekha Banerjee, July 29, 1956) is a contemporary Indian-American writer. She was born in Kolkata, India and went to the United States for graduate studies. There she earned her master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and her PhD. from the University of California, Berkeley. She has been awarded with the 1995 American Book Awards, Pushcart Prize and Crawford Award.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni suffers from modern problems and various problems alienation, marriage, motherhood, conflict, motherhood, class, individualization, women as mothers, wives, sisters, and finally, a second gender or gender object, as well as an important female as a human being. She looks for customs and traditions and finds them in their heritage, the key to women's aspirations and needs in today's world. She acknowledges the paradox of a specific field and also engages in ideological, artistic, philosophical and cultural struggles.

In this way, she builds a path of modernity, pride, freedom, love and sex as inspirational through modern emotional reactions. Divakaruni usually portrays a female character as the main character. Her story focuses on the lives of women, especially immigrants, through which she seeks to express her inner feelings and experiences.

Her novels and short stories portray educated, indomitable, strong minded and ungovernable female characters who do not wait to break free from male chauvinism. The beautiful Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), the mysterious Tilo in *The Lady of Spices* (1997) and the rebellious Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002) are the examples of many other strong women that are presented by Divakaruni in her work in a subtle, believable way. Chitra Banerjee in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* transformed marginalized women into new icons of independence, proving that women have the ability to rein in the community. Indian women are portrayed as powerful female subjects who seemingly always ask difficult questions about identity, self-awareness, family and social roles, even as they seek to rejoin community, history and society.

In quote posted on Random House website, Divakaruni once commented on her writing by saying “There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious - the essence of spirituality - that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It

was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community” (Divakaruni).

In Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusion*, the author does not tend to invent a new world, but from Mahabharata of Ved Vyasa, she tells the story in a very dignified way from the perspective of Draupadi. Patriarchy has dominant system of norms, rules, beliefs and laws since a very long time. Many women have been mistreated and placed under the control of men. Draupadi along with many other females are also victims of society dominated by men.

The novel's story told through Draupadi's eyes recounts the early incidents of her unusual birth, her lonely childhood, her mysterious friendship and relationship with Krishna, her marriage, her feelings for Karna, her distinct role in keeping the Pandavas together, her insecurities as a woman, motherhood and her journey through the epic. The novel is certainly a feminist work in which myths are revised, rewritten and retold from female's perspective.

Traditionally, Draupadi has not been highly valued and was portrayed almost negatively in Hindu society. It is widely believed that it was her deliberate actions that led to the destruction of the third era of mankind, and she was known as *kritika*, who brought misery and misfortune to her clan. However, Divakaruni abandons such an interpretation and provides a new perspective on Panchali.

In an interview with Metka Zupancic, Chitra Banerjee said

As in many epics, the central position was reserved for men, with wars, weapons, strategy, and court maneuvers. I remember from quite a young age, even before I could have articulated the idea, how I was always concerned about the women. What was the story of all these interesting and complex characters, all these strong women who are never at the center of the narrative?

What were they feeling? What were they thinking? (Zupancic)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni embraces the challenging task of diving into the depths of Draupadi and articulates the deepest feelings of a mythical woman, her constant struggles and the ordeal she must face while suffering in a patriarchal society, many circumstances hindered her inner feelings that her many marriages might imply for her, and her secret love for the man, the only man she could marry or let her feelings know. Her novel is quite modern in its approach to contemporary issues of home and belonging, love and the emotion of failure, war and its perception of futility, and most importantly, in its depiction of a fiercely independent woman who remained rigid to pressure of the patriarchy, and fought tooth and nail until her last breath.

Divakaruni tries to unravel the greater tensions in her story: Draupadi's human conflict between herself and the social norms of the gender she is expected to uphold, like any woman, while carrying the burden of not being loved or the love being reciprocated. She is unknowingly forced to have multiple husbands, which puts her in a situation where she is guilty of being considered a corrupt woman.

This study attempts to show how, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Palace of Illusions*, revisits the Indian epic Mahabharata through Draupadi's perspective; the Pandava queen. It focuses on how Divakaruni destabilizes epic models of the hero cipher and solves the problem of subject positions by providing self-determination to female voices. It also raises the question of whether the epic setting undergoes major changes when viewed through the eyes of a daughter, wife, mother and especially a woman stuck in sub-boundary boundaries. system and rebel against them or not.

The objective of this research article is to analyze Draupadi and other female characters from the Mahabharata as portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, a godly fantasy novel *Palace of Illusions* re-evaluating Mahabharata events from Draupadi's point of view.

Research Methodology

The current study is a qualitative study and has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the introduction of the dissertation, focusing on the details of Hindu mythologies, its history, importance, drawback and need for revision and reinterpretation. It also deals with the author of the novel. The second chapter analyses the text, its protagonist Draupadi and other female character from feminist lens. The work is theoretically dealt with theorists like Helen Cixous, Elaine Showalter and Simon de Beauvoir. The chapter also discusses voice of women in male dominated society.

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## CHAPTER 2

At the beginning of the novel, in the "Author's Note" Divakaruni states that she grew up listening to Mahabharata stories "in the lantern-lit evenings at my grandfather's village home" and always remained "dissatisfied with the portrayal of the women in these stories", a feeling that continued to bother her till she became mature enough to read the Mahabharata herself .

She admitted that when she was little, she thought that if ever she decides to write a book, she "would place the women in the forefront of the action", and also "uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it". She says the most suitable person for this purpose is Panchaali, or Draupadi, and so she welcomes us into her novel by saying: "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*" (Divakaruni x).

The structure of the novel is in homodiegetic narrative, here, the protagonist Draupadi is the narrator, who narrates her life's story and the happening and characters associated with it. Written in bildungsroman style, the novel starts with the emergence of the protagonist from a sacred fire, recounting of her experience and then ending with her death. While narrating the incidents in her life, all the famous tales and people of the Mahabharata are recited and expressed from Draupadi's perspective and understanding. Those stories where she wasn't personally included were told to her by other characters such as her nanny or brother. Each chapter has single-word title which mysteriously but consciously delivers the spirit of the experience told in it.

*The Palace of Illusions* is a revisionist text that rethinks the value of women in society and reconsiders our feelings about their lives. The liberation of Draupadi from the prison of perfection and so-called sanctity was clearly demonstrated by Divakaruni. The females help themselves by identifying and resolving problems and rewrite their fate by going against traditional practices. This revisionist literary text helps highlight modern issues such as identity, exclusion and discrimination against women in patriarchal society.

One of the areas where the novel deviates from the orthodox Sanskrit epic tradition in a rather obvious way is its treatment of law or justice. The Sanskrit epic is, in many ways, a celebration of dharma, which explains its place as a religious text. Yudhisthir, son of Indra, is considered by many to be the embodiment of dharma, and his position as the eldest of the Pandava clans as well as eventual victor, provides an overview of the story that celebrates his values that he possesses. The novel challenges established understanding of dharma. One of the main ways the novel achieved this is by limiting narrative space and importance accorded to Yudhisthir. Divakaruni's Yudhisthir does not enjoy the same prominent position as in the Sanskrit epic. He, like all the other characters in the novel, is presented through Panchaali, and this presentation is still defined by her explicit assessment of the character, which is largely unfavorable.

Living under a male dominated society, the first impact of it is on Draupadi's education that is not meant for her because her brother takes precedence over her. Her tutor told her brother to inform her that "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (Divakaruni 26). They neglected her studies. When she asked her brother "who decided that woman's highest purpose was to support men?"

(Divakaruni 26). The brother replied that this is what I want you to do. Here, Divakaruni tries to bring out the ancient practice of every woman from this period, whether she is a queen or a common woman. Education was not given to women as it was to men because it was their duty to take care of their husbands and to pray for them to die gloriously on the battlefield.

Panchaali's direct criticism of the idea of dharma is found in her response to what happens at the game of dice. When her husbands failed to save her at the most offended moment, she came to the following conclusion:

All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me, they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much perhaps as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies. (Divakaruni 180)

Panchaali presents this review in the light when Yudhisthira staked her in the dice game and forfeited her to Duryodhana's in her absence and without her being aware, and also at a time when her new owners tried to insult her by undressing her in front of her own husbands and other adults including her father-in-law who did nothing to protect her. Here, Panchaali is at the receiving end of not only of non-dharmic (adharmic) conduct, but also of Dharmic conduct. All the insults by Duryodhana and his group to her show that she is a victim of adharma, while the Pandavas' failure to help her is mainly out of their

(especially Yudhishtira's) respect for dharma shows how she is a victim to dharma.

Interestingly, in both these kinds of victimization, her fate is intrinsically tied to her position as a woman. When Duryodhana orders her to be naked, especially during her period, he primarily targets her as a woman. At the same time, when the Pandavas choose

not to step in to protect her, they are neglecting their culturally defined duty as a wife. In such a context, this critique of Panchaali shows that dharma can be as discriminatory as adharma, especially towards women. The novel thus highlights the fundamental gendered nature of dharma, which the Pandavas as well as the Mahabharata as a religious and cultural text advocate and celebrate.

Another place where the idea of dharma is criticized is the final scene where the Pandavas and Panchaali walk towards heaven. She said, “I could have scrambled up to the path somehow—but for what? To listen to another of Yudhishtira sermons? Better to lie here, in relative peace, and gather my thoughts”(Divakaruni 182). This scene, which marks the end of Panchaali, is defined by the tension between human emotions and the law, and is contrary to what the mainstream readings of the Sanskrit epic appear to do, she places the former above the latter.

When she mentions the order in which the Pandavas walk, she implies that although Yudhisthir knows nothing about the fates of people close to him, but he uses them to achieve his own ends. One can justify his behaviors, from the definite point of view, that each of them is responsible for his past actions and that there is nothing he can do to change his fate. their own, but Panchaali points out that it is necessary to go beyond this sense of determinism and realize the value of human relationship.

Draupadi's existence and experience take precedence, her quest for recognition, identity, education, love, and existence in the palace is written by the author, an attempt to be recognized and appreciated. Many other female characters are portrayed by Divakaruni. All the characters live lives of their own choosing, not imposed by them or imposed by men in society: Kunti, Panchaali's mother-in-law chose to sacrifice her life to raise her children, she even decided to raise her husband's kids. Gandhari after marrying the blind king Dhritarashtra, decided to blindfold herself for the rest of her life and live equally, devotedly to her husband. Draupadi's experiences right from her birth is a major focus in the work. During her birth, her father was expecting a male child. The first inequality or rejection was

from her father's part when he greeted her brother and not her. "He held out his arms but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted" (Divakaruni 56).

There are many descriptions of suffering of women but underneath, their assertive nature and femininity are effectively portrayed and conceived. Draupadi is the main key, to interrogate folk men against injustice and denial of women. Mahabharata, the lesser known and visited female existence, the Palace of Illusions provides a window to revisit the women of ancient myths.

In *Laugh of the Medusa* Helene Cixous said that, "Woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 1). Throughout the novel, Divakaruni builds Draupadi in such a way that makes her reflect on the unavoidable destiny and the confusion she has regarding her own image and how other perceives her. She longs for freedom but simultaneously makes efforts to satisfy and fit into the male dominant society. Her sense of identity is reflected severely when she observes her husbands after marriage. She said to herself, "I was a woman. I had to use my powers differently"(Divakaruni 191), clearly portraying images of inequality in position and independence.

Divakaruni portrayed Draupadi as a character that directs the destiny of her husbands. She said –

I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardships in khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner. (Divakaruni 151)

A powerful affirmation of a women's search for identity corresponds along with her own values and desires. Here, Draupadi tells her story from birth, prophecies, forbidden desires and painful conflicts in the heart that is not voiced before. Draupadi's "swayamvara" (marriage) and the "cheerharan" (disrobement) incident show society that is governed by patriarchy and have complete control over women's body and choices. But nonetheless, Draupadi doesn't gave in to the established gender role by submissively taking responsibility of everything as her fault, but instead chose to fight for her dignity.

Elaine Showalter in her work *Towards a Feminist Poetics* says, "We are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but We are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be." In ancient literature as Elaine Showalter says women's experiences are not even considered, but in the Palace of Illusions, the character Draupadi shows both how she is treated and how she learns to behave at childhood, marriage and war. How to become a daughter, wife and mother. What would be her duty as a princess and queen, as well as about how she felt and experienced. Views of society and men towards women should also be prioritized. I don't wish to imply that King Drupad neglected my education.

An unending stream of women owed through my apartments each day, attempting to instruct me in the sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know. I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet.) I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me. I had a destiny to fulfill that was no less momentous than Dhri's. Why was no one concerned about preparing me for it? (Divakaruni 32)

Chitra Banerjee sheds light on the plight of Draupadi, a woman with five husbands who receives a boon to regain her virginity every time she arrives with the Pandavas' new brother. Draupadi was angry and felt helpless as Vyasa's judgment was passed from hand to hand without her will. Divakaruni speaks through the protagonist of her novel, Draupadi, that,

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. And along with that I'd have requisitioned that Arjuna be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness. (Divakaruni 120)

The above lines clearly show Draupadi's reluctance towards the other Pandavas as well as her desire to have Arjuna as the first husband she might have loved if he loved her back. The lines also make us reflect on her passionate love without words for Karna that she had to suppress and for which she regretted for the rest of her life. Although Pandavas married Draupadi and gave her the rightful title of being their foremost queen, they married and had other wives after her. "My husbands took other wives: Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Karunamati. How naïve I'd been to think I could have prevented it! Sometimes there were political reasons, but mostly it was male desire" (Divakaruni 151).

In an effort to describe the ideal character of Draupadi, Divakaruni has added many new stories and characters. One such figure is Dhai Ma, Draupadi's servant, whom Divakaruni uses as a tool to understand Draupadi's inner conflicts. This particular character helps Draupadi overcome some problems in her life journey. She was constantly near Draupadi like her shadow. Dhai maa was the only friend, philosopher, guide for her.



She never got to know a mother's love or a father's fondness or a group of same-age friends. At each step, she appears as her helper. In fact, Dhai Ma plays a major role in providing Panchaali's true identity.

It was Dhai Ma who told Panchaali the story of her birth, causing Draupadi to recognize discrimination even on the names her father gave her and her brother: "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (Divakaruni 5).

Dhai Ma, who calls Draupadi "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" while telling the story of the birth of Draupadi and her brother Dhri, who also appeared from fire with divine announcement from heaven, saying, "When your brother stepped out of the sacrificial fire onto the cold stone slabs of the palace hall, all the assembly cried out in amazement."

She continues, "when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped" (Divakaruni 1-2).

In another conversation between Dhai Ma and Draupadi, we learn how in a patriarchal society a woman is judged when she has physical relationship with multiple man. " You know what our shastras call women who've been with more than one man, don't you? Though no one seems to have a problem when men sleep with a different wife each day of the week!" (Divakaruni 42). However, Draupadi's marriage to Pandavas could not erase the "slut" label that society calls a woman who sleeps with many men. Marrying five husbands is an unthinkable act, an act of disgust but a man is entitled to as many wives as he pleases.

The prophet Vyasa devised a special marriage code that Draupadi had to marry each brother for a year, from the eldest one to the youngest. During this time, her other siblings must keep and maintain a safe distance from her. If privacy is compromised while Draupadi is with one of her husbands, the other will be excluded from her family for a year. To make up for that, Vyasa gave Draupadi the benefit of becoming her virgin again every time she went to her other brother. "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (Divakaruni 120). The boon provided by Vyasa was more of a benefit to Draupadi's husband as she would be

considered pure in their eyes again. It highlights the ironic face of society dominated by men. "That seems to be the nature of the boon for women- they are given to us as gifts we don't want yet" (Divakaruni 120).

In her married life, her thoughts and feelings require a lot of adjustment as she was the one changing her lifestyle for each husband to keep them happy and satisfied. Still Draupadi felt that her relationship with her husbands was superior and priceless. "If they are pearls, I am the thread they are strung on"(Divakaruni 151).

Simon de Beauvoir's in *The Second Sex* (1949) writes "One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman". When Panchaali is interested in learning martial arts and war ethics. She is trained in manners wife and support men in war. Concern with "conditionalization" and "socialization" as the basis for a series of important distinctions between the terms 'feminist', 'female', and 'feminine'. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology', and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'.

There are few other strong female characters beside Draupadi who are also considered resilient in the novel. Divakaruni describes the story of Kunti, who dedicated her whole life to equally raise her sons Pandavas and their father's second wife's son, grooming them like kings. Also, Gandhari who decided to blind-fold herself because she does not want to enjoy the pleasures her husband was devoid of, being a blind king and chose to live as equals with her husband, giving up her power as queen and mother. In this novel, she represents both tradition and to some extent, sometimes she advises her husband to give Pandava their rights. She suggested her husband as he focused on Duryodhana rather than Hastinapur. She also argues that if Hastinapur were alive, only we would have any value. Uttara, whose husband Abhimanyu martyred in the Kurukshetra war, vowed to live for the sake of unborn heir in her womb. Despite the pain of losing her husband, she still has hope

for the future of her son that would one day succeed the throne and reign over the great land of her forefathers.

All of this shows that these women are strong enough to continue with the times. Instead of clinging to the old stuff. What makes Divakaruni's novel different than other interpretations of the epics is that it portrays all these women took the decisions consciously rather than roles given to them by society or men. Giving ancient Indian women such potential and independence is extraordinary. Divakaruni's version brings a humanity to this part of Mahabharata, making it more believable, real, and personal.

Shikhandi was born in previous life as Princess Amba of Kashi Kingdom. She was the eldest daughter of two other sisters, Ambika and Ambalika. She and her sisters were taken as wives by Bhishma from Hastinapur, for his brother Vichitraveerya, after defeating several suitors including King Salwa of Saubala, who was secretly in love with Amba. When brought to Hastinapur, Amba rejected Vichitraveerya and so Bhishma returned her back. When she comes to Salwa, he rejects her and says that Bhishma has just won her, so he is the one she should marry. But Bhishma swore celibacy. Angered by this helplessness, Amba committed suicide and vowed to be the one to end Bhishma's life in her next incarnation. Amba was reborn as Shikhandi, the only son of the Panchaala royal family, until Draupadi and Drishtadyumna were born by sacrificial fire. During the Battle of Kurukshetra, when Shikhandi was brought to the battlefield, Bhishma immediately recognized him and refused to raise his weapons at him, as Shikhandi was female in his previous life. So, taking advantage, Arjuna attacked Bhishma from behind, resulting in his death.

During the Kurukshetra War, Vyasa gave a special boon to Draupadi. She accepted it although she was very much aware of what this clash holds in its pocket, everyone she loved and cared for were on the battle ground. She was also aware of her reputation, especially among wives of soldiers that lost their life in the battle field. The aftermath of the war left Draupadi in shock to face the gazes of widows left behind after the war. All her dishonor

and vengeance seemed so minute in front of mourning widows, who saw her as "the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows" (Divakaruni 258).

In the end, Draupadi decided to do something for the widow women by establishing her own court, where women can talk about their pain with other women. They also created a market for them with the help of by Uttara and Kunti giving them a sense of community. Finally, Panchaali showed up, and her strength was appreciated by Vyasa as he revealed many prophecies even those, he hadn't told her husband. "I only tell people what they can stand. Knowing Pariksit's fate now, just when he's recovering from his long dejection, would break Yudhishter. And his brothers wouldn't be able to bear that. But you-I've always known you to be stronger than your husbands"(Divakaruni 329). At last, Draupadi decided to go with her husband to the secret corners of the Himalayas to attain salvation. This demonstrates her loyalty towards her husband until her last breath and fearlessness which has always been her iconic quality, right from the start.

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### CONCLUSION

Ancient epics can be defined as the story of a glorifying class, primarily about the lives of men where the voice and outlook of female characters are not valued. In epics, the identity of female characters is based on their relationship with opposite gender. It is not autonomous and she does not have her own identity. They are portrayed as daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, sisters etc., all of which are depicted in relation to others who have themselves lost their true self: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the other" (Beauvoir 6). Simon De Beauvoir, in her the *Second Sex* had rightly quoted a seventeenth-century feminist, who said, "Everything that men have written about women should be viewed with suspicion, because they are both judge and party" (Beauvoir 10). And the epic as a creation of the male mind presents the male point of view justifying the need to revisit the epic from the female point of view to determine the extent to which the female characters have become victims in the source text.

Dhai Ma and Draupadi commented on Gandhari's devotion, saying that her sacrifice was unwise. Likewise, Draupadi assumed that if her husbands were blind, she could never blindfold herself because she could report everything that was happening to them. According to her, Gandhari tried to make up for her husband's loss of vision. But she made

a vow and got trapped in her own words. On the other hand, Gandhari's husband took a woman as his mistress. He was not criticized and reviled for such a dual role. Divakaruni highlights the heroine, who is challenging, compelling and rebellious. Her heroine is not afraid to confront and go against patriarchal norms. It is clear that the novelist considers Draupadi of Mahabharata to be an independent and self-respecting woman. The image of the woman depicted in the novel is of a warrior. Draupadi is depicted as a warrior fighting for her freedom and it's she who can assert her individuality, selfhood and identity. Draupadi refuses to believe that a woman's identity comes from her husband or father. She refused to be called by the name Draupadi which means daughter of Drupad, so she changed her name to Panchaali originating from Panchaal kingdom.

Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions* itself serves as a general metaphor for life. Maya is an illusion, humans continue to support her with effort and pain, through strife, malice and humiliation. Divakaruni explores the psychological state of Draupadi. She discovers Draupadi's suffering and suffering caused by the separation of her various beings. This is evidenced again by Draupadi's decision to follow her husband on their final journey. Again, she is a faithful wife. As her powers begin to fail, she reflects:

Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain ..., my last victory over the other wives ... How could I resist it?  
(Divakaruni 343)

This shows a complex mixture of emotions and delicate appreciation of the character Draupadi in the novel. The novelist describes her as a role model for women's liberation. Draupadi's death appears as a release and resolution of the contradictions about her identity: "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first

time, I'm truly Panchaali" (Divakaruni 360). It's tragic that Draupadi struggled for her identity during her time on this earth and felt empathetic comfort after her life.

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