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## Exploring mythic appropriation of femininity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction

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### Abstract

Carl Jung defines myth as personal while Joseph Campbell considers it as the essential channel of projecting the energies of the universe through 'cultural manifestations'. Myth deals with the particularities of a culture according to the peculiarities of the worldview of its people. Myth arises from the specific concerns of a culture.

Mythic appropriation has long been used as a contrivance by patriarchy to completely incorporate the idea of Femininity being inferior to manliness. Patriarchy has framed the idea of Femininity which attributes frailty, fickleness and frivolity to women. Female is often deemed to be a mute, passive and nonchalant spectator of male action. It is assumed that female agency does not exist. Patriarchy also shuns the idea of female identity and female consciousness. Patriarchy has long evoked the mythical thought to become the carrier of testimony to female insignificance. According to Claude Levi-Strauss in his *The Savage Mind* "Mythical thought for its part is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning." (Strauss 22) Mythical thought has been used as an effectual ideological tool to sustain patriarchal control over women in Indian society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her fiction not only explores the mythic appropriation of Femininity but also subverts it. She questions the practice of gender construction and attributing passivity to women in the patriarchal world. She employs literature for the 're-ordering' of the mythical thought to lend agency and voice to Draupadi amidst male heroism, war and mythic appropriation of gender in the epic of *Mahabharata*.

**Keywords:** Appropriation, Draupadi, femininity, gender, Mahabharata, myth, patriarchy

### Introduction

Myth, is a recognition of natural conflicts, of human desire frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression, or contrary desires; it is a story of the birth, passion, and defeat by death which is man's common fate. Its ultimate end is not wishful distortion of the world, but serious envisagement of its fundamental truths; moral orientation, not escape.

-Susan K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*

Myth has often been distorted and misinterpreted in support of a dominant ideology of a culture but the basic underlying mythic structural pattern as argued by Joseph Campbell survives in human unconscious, which time and again erupts through the ritual of creativity. This mythic structural pattern signifies the pursuit of one's own inner truth. The pattern of the quest for meaning inherent in the myth is not restricted by the gender constructs of patriarchy. So, even the myth which is shaped in patriarchal cultures and is seeped with the androcentric ideology may present the hope of exploding the gender constructs through exploring mythic Appropriation of Femininity and achieving an alternative vision for women. In contemporary times this mythic pattern is being probed by many South Asian writers in order to retell and reinterpret the myth of their cultures.

The purpose of the paper is to emphasize the unravelling of this very mythic structural pattern by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. The novel challenges and reinterprets the given mythic vision of female identity in the *Mahabharata*, a foundational mythical text of India which, apart from spiritual values, contains ideals of *dharma*, social norms and gender roles. A myth crystallizes a universal situation in a story which is independent of time and place, and, therefore, a contemporary situation gains extension backwards in the history of mankind if it can be related to myth.

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The novel contrives a confluence of gender and identity and challenges the conception of femininity as presented in the original text from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of a woman, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female voice in the famous saga of the Great War between two dynasties, the heroics of the virtuous male heroes and their dedicated wives. The text emphasizes the quest for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly South Asian, yet transcends cultural borders and gains a universal essence.

The creative focus in the novel is on Draupadi, one of the heroines of the *Mahabharata* who is presented in an opposed light. Divakaruni's narrative at times appears to be faithfully following the original, but it challenges the traditional perspective by allowing the reader to perceive the mind of the up till now silent Draupadi.

Traditionally, Indian society is a patriarchal society with fixed roles of the sexes. The entrenching view for femininity makes the oppressive attitude pervasive and widely accepted. Consequently, the issues of female identity and woman's position in the society are the topics being dealt by Indian writers and especially by Divakaruni in her fiction.

The novel, *The Palace of Illusions* presents a spiritual feminist retelling of the epic from the viewpoint of Draupadi. Divakaruni also brings into focus the conspicuous mute presence of women at the crucial points of the narrative, as on the instance of the silent grief of the widows after the battle of Kurukshetra. Another revelation is the intimacy between Draupadi and Krishna, but the triggering point of the Great War, her secret love for Karna is depicted with a psychological realism of a woman living a life of self-denial. It is a decisive change in comparison to the original in which female voices are usually either absent or presented through a male perspective.

The initial chapters of the novel, present Draupadi's preoccupation with her birth and introduces her defiant character as well as her strife for a feminine identity of her own making. She dreams of the day when she will be leaving her father's palace, a smothering place for her, which "seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (PI, 1). She is teasingly called as "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (PI, 1), as she emerged from the fire surprisingly, with her twin-brother, the long awaited and desired male heir of the empire. The preference accorded to the male is recorded even in the names given to the siblings, while her brother is named "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", she is simply called "Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (PI, 5), a name she thinks is an affirmation of patriarchal dependency and to be incongruous with the prophecy made at her birth: "she will change the course of history" (PI, 5). From the very beginning the narrative emphasizes an important link between names, gender, and identity. Draupadi envies the authority and license inherent in her brother's name, the destiny of his life, to kill their father's chief enemy Drona, while hers is merely a symbolic predominance of patriarchy. Curiosity, one of the attributes of her mind makes her restless about the future course of her life, the oracular sayings of a seer, Vyasa resonates at every turn that her life takes. Her life is preordained to contain the events of her marriage with the five greatest heroes of her time, her glory like that of a goddess, her magical palace, her subsequent lose of it, her crucial part in the start of the greatest war, the deaths of millions, her being loved and yet dying alone. She is named by the seer as, "Panchaali, spirit

of this land" (PI, 41), this name excites her as it has a meaning of its own and was not dependent on her father for its essence.

In the novel, Panchaali narrates her story and dreams of having her own palace one day. Thus she claims both an authority of being a mistress of a palace and narrative voice, establishing her identity by being connected to a location and gaining control over her life and its portrayal to others.

In her negation to learn only the demarcated female skills (painting, sewing and poetry) is her rebellion against the narrow limits of scholasticism of her times. She desires to learn the knowledge taught to her brother (lessons about royal rule, justice and power).

Divakaruni through Draupadi exposes the schism that a woman experiences in a patriarchal society. The stereotyping of gender creates a discrepancy between the perception of the society and her self-image. The central tension exists in Draupadi's ambivalence, her desire for self-assertion and the efforts to meet the expectations of the society.

The novel traces Draupadi's journey of gaining self-knowledge, of her understanding the world around her, of her becoming Panchaali. The impetuous and rebellious girl eventually becomes a self-assured and sedate wife, who is respected for her intelligence by her husbands. Through her marriage, Panchaali gains reverence and the authority of being the mistress of the palace of illusions which seems to have emancipated her. But, this is not just due to her changed status of that of an acknowledged beauty with brains from an unwanted child of dark complexion but because, as Vyasa informs her: "You no longer care what people think of you, and that has given you a great freedom" (PI, 180). It is a partial liberation of her inner self from the shackles of the judgement pronounced by the society. Her identity is now not dependent on the expectations of others. She gains a sense of independence which she knows is granted naturally to men, and so she feels that, "in some matters, I was equal" (PI, 180). Often she fluctuates between passivity and activity, as can be traced through her statement: "I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart [...], I never gave it fully to them" (PI, 213). It reveals her concealed passion for Karna, which demonstrates her inner being remaining completely free from the constraints and demands of the outer world.

After Yudhisthir's cataclysmic loss in the game of dice, Duryodhan becomes the master of the kingdom, Panchaali's palace, and the Pandavas themselves. Panchaali has also been gambled away like mute property, "no less so than a cow or a slave" (PI, 190). When Panchaali is forced to come into the royal court, all the elders simply stare at her, no one comes to her rescue. The worst shock for Panchaali is that her husbands, the five greatest warriors of their times "sat paralyzed", transfixed due to their greater love for their own honour and propriety. She is humiliated by the stripping of all her ornaments, yet the command to take off her sari, the only piece of clothing protecting her from "a hundred male eyes burning through me" (PI, 191) is the ultimate insult to impose a perpetuating shame on her. Panchaali describes her disrobing as: "The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time" (PI, 193). She is infuriated by her vulnerable position amidst the oppressive silence of all the men present, by the easy ignorance of her question that whether

Yudhisthira, a lost man himself has any right to lose her. Enraged and vengeful Panchaali pronounces the terrible curse of the battle, which will wrought destruction on all and takes a vow of not combing her hair till “the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood” (PI, 194). She decides to sacrifice an integral attribute that comprised traditional femininity as a reminder of her desire for revenge, as particularly in ancient India long shiny fragrant hair symbolized female beauty. After this, Panchaali thinks of Krishna, who is the only one who does not abandon her in her hour of need. He saves her from that ultimate shame by extending her sari endlessly which prevents the satisfaction of the depraved men indulging in the act of her disrobing.

Despite the evoking of the image of the victim, the scene presents Panchaali as asserting her female strength and authority. The situation pushes forth a painful actualization of emancipation for Panchaali who is forced to fend for herself as the men in her life miserably fail her, while also gaining the knowledge that how “emotions are always intertwined with power and pride” (PI, 195). From now on vengeance seems to be the mission of her life yet she misses the complacency of a stable selfhood: “it seemed that everything I’d lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn’t listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchaali” (PI, 229).

In the last section of the novel, the depiction of the Great War and its consequences present Divakaruni’s most revolutionary transformation of the plot of the original epic. The entire event is observed through female consciousness. The poignancy of pain, suffering and loss of the loved ones is portrayed brilliantly: “But here’s something Vyasa didn’t put down in his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman” (PI, 298).

The narrative accentuates the grief of the women, raising it to a shared feeling of loss blotting out the distinction between family and enemies, between the victorious and the defeated. After the battle, the widows try to invoke the traditional ritual of ‘Sati’ by jumping onto the funeral pyres of their husbands. The pressing situation makes Panchaali adorn an active role and address the grieved women, empathising with them and speaking to them as a woman and mother sharing their grief and pain. Panchaali’s sincerity of emotions creates a bond of sisterhood among them and she manages to save their lives.

The loss of countless lives due to the war, engenders an alteration in Panchaali’s personality, she progresses from being an ireful and vengeful woman to a person responding to the demands of community: “It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (PI, 323). Devakaruni’s feminist ambition explores the idea of establishing a sanctuary for the women where they will be equal to the men in all aspects of life: “And even in the later years [...], Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment” (PI, 325). The idea is further developed through Devakaruni’s envisaging economic independence for the women through the setting up of

businesses by Panchaali and the other ladies of the royal house hold for the women of Hastinapur: “In time the women’s market became a flourishing centre of trade in the city” (PI, 324).

The analysis thus, reveals that Draupadi has followed her own dreams and has transposed her vision of female identity to the women of her kingdom. From being the unwanted child, an outcast to her own gender, she has emerged as the light of emancipation, uniting the women to share in her vision of leading a liberated life.

Divakaruni’s Draupadi (Panchaali) challenges and reinterprets the myth of *Mahabharata*, which has been perpetuating the vision of the female as a marginalised and silent entity, to be trampled over by the patriarchy. In *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi takes the centre stage, she is the pivoting factor and the entire story revolves around her, she is explicitly vocal about every facet of her life and stands as a formidable force for her self-protection when the men fail to protect her. She is an epitome of empowerment and female courage, emotionally stronger than the greatest men, as expressed by Vyasa in the novel, who extols her strength in his words: “I’ve always known you to be stronger than your husbands” (PI, 329).

Draupadi’s quest for identity of self is a solitary personal journey wherein she crosses the boundaries prescribed by the patriarchy to her. This is inscribed in Panchaali’s choice to remain a companion of her husbands on their final journey to the Himalayan Mountains. As she reflects on her decision she realises that she liked to stand firm against the winds of opposition: “The more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. [...], my last victory over the other wives [...]. How could I resist it?” (PI, 343-44).

Panchaali comprehends the phenomenon of death under the divine guidance of Krishna as the ultimate liberating experience: “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Panchaali” (PI, 360).

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