



# CULTURE AND ETHICAL VALUES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *PALACE OF ILLUSION*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Mahabharata and The Ramayana* are the two great epics in Indian literature that explore the belief of Hinduism. Every human deed gives rise to a myth that connects it to historical occurrences like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The role of men and women are distinct in *The Palace of Illusion*. Women are consigned to the domestic skills while men are elevated as worries and statesmen. Intellectual respect for women is lacking. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the famous Indian born American author. Among all of her works *The Palace of Illusion* takes unique place in today's world. *The Palace of Illusion* describes the theme of courage, suffering, domination and grapple. Writers like Anand Neelakantan, Amish Tripathi are modernizing the old version of mythology with past and present scenarios. Mythology converts ordinary events into an extraordinary one so that the myth is still alive in minds of the Indians. Almost all day in the Indian calendar connected with mythology. In this epic, Draupadi's life shows how women accept the culture without any queries. The perspective of Draupadi's life is totally different from normal women. Draupadi is a devoted wife of the five Pandavas. The important thing to learn from Draupadi is self-esteem, confidence and persistence. This paper focuses on cultural and ethical values in *The Palace of Illusion*. It presents a fresh take of the novelist's portrayal of Draupadi's voice.

## Key words

Culture, Ethical Values, Mythology, Self-Esteem, Confidence, Persistence.

Indian literature is a rich and diverse body of literary works that encompasses a wide range of languages, cultures and traditions. It has a history spanning thousands of years and it is one of the world's oldest literary traditions. Indian literature includes classical texts like the Vedas and Upanishads, as well as epic poem like *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. Some of the most prominent languages in Indian literature include Sanskrit, Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and many others. Notable Indian authors and poets such as Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and many other have made significant contributions to world literature. Contemporary Indian literature often addresses themes such as social issues, cultural identity and the complexities of modern India. Indian literature reflects the country's rich cultural, historical and linguistic diversity making it a vibrant and influential part of global literary heritage.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed India-American author and poet. She is known for her works that explore the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States and the complexities of cultural identity. She is also a co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 in San Francisco for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Her notable books include *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Palace of Illusion*. Her writing often weaves elements of Indian mythology and tradition into contemporary storytelling. She writes for children as well as adults and published novels in multiple genres including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, myth and fantasy.

*The Palace of Illusions* is a captivating novel written by Indian author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, published in 2008. This remarkable work reimagines the epic tale of *The Mahabharata* from a unique and thought-provoking perspective. Drawing inspiration from ancient Indian mythology and folklore, Divakaruni weaves a narrative that revolves around the life of Draupadi, also known as Panchali, a central character in *The Mahabharata*. Through Divakaruni's skillful storytelling readers are transported into a world of grandeur, intrigue and magic. As they follow Draupadi's journey from her birth in fire to her marriage to the Pandavas brothers her trials and tribulations and her pivotal role in the great Kurukshetra War. As a narrative that explores themes of love, ambition, loyalty and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, *The Palace of Illusions* not only offers a feminist perspective on a myth but also challenges traditional interpretations of this ancient story. In this introduction, researcher will delve deeper into the captivating world created by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and the rich tapestry of emotions, choices and conflicts that define the life of Draupadi in this mesmerizing novel.

## Research Through Innovation

Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, moral and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. It also refers to the values, customs, traditions and practices that characterize of a particular group of people or society. Culture is not static; it evolves over time through interactions with other cultures, historical events, and changing societal dynamics. It plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' identities and their sense of belonging within a larger community. Understanding and respecting different cultures is essential for promoting diversity, inclusivity, and cross-cultural communication in our increasingly interconnected world. Culture is also referred as symbolic communication. Ethical values are principles or standards that guide individuals and societies in determining what is morally right and wrong. These

values serve as a framework for making ethical judgements and decision in various aspects of life including personal behavior, relationships, business and society as a whole. Ethical values can vary from person to person and culture to culture. It provides a moral compass for individuals and communities to navigate complex ethical dilemmas and make choices that align with their sense of right and wrong.

The novel is deeply rooted in Indian culture portraying its customs, rituals and societal norms. It explores the role of women in ancient India the importance of duty and the complex relationship within a royal family. Draupadi's character challenges traditional gender roles. Her desire for justice and her assertiveness in a male-dominated society reflect the struggle for women empowerment highlighting cultural expectations and limitations faced by women. The Characters grapple with questions of righteousness, duty and the consequences of their actions showcasing the ethical values of truth, justice and honor. The *Mahabharata* is centered around the Kurukshetra war, a massive conflict. The ethical aspects of war including the justification for it and the conduct during battle that are explored in the novel raising questions about the costs of power and ambition. Cultural values of loyalty to family and clan as well as the consequences of betrayal are recurring themes. Draupadi's loyalty to her husbands and her struggle to cope with their weaknesses and betrayals highlight these values. In *The Palace of Illusions* culture and ethical values are intertwined with the narrative shaping the character's actions and decisions and providing a thought-provoking commentary on timeless themes that continue to resonate with readers.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is indeed known for her powerful portrayal of female character in her novels. She often explores women-oriented themes and depicts her female characters as strong and independent individuals who challenge societal norms and dogmas. Her writing celebrates women as iconoclasts and warriors highlighting their resilience and determination in the face of adversity. She also portrays Panchali as a modern woman who strives to express her thoughts and ideas in the contemporary world. Panchali's journey, which begins with her birth alongside her twin brother for the holy fire, symbolizes her unique and challenging path. Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchali's character highlights her strength and determination to assert herself in a society that often limits women voices and choices. Indeed, many novels explore the theme of women being confined by traditional and cultural norms. They can shed light on the reason behind these systems and provoke critical thinking about the persistence in both ancient and modern times. Panchali is a significant character in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. She is often seen as a symbol of strength, and resilience challenging societal norms and advocating for justice. *The Mahabharata* with its rich storytelling not only offers insights into ancient Indian culture and traditions but also provides timeless lesson that can be applied to contemporary life making it a valuable literary and cultural treasure.

Panchali Falls in love with Karna, a character from the Mahabharata who is not allowed to participate in her Swayamvar (a traditional Indian ceremony where a princess chooses her husband from a group of suitors). This unfulfilled love adds complexity of her life. After her Swayamvar, Panchali is forced into a polyandrous marriage with the five Pandavas (Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva). She had no way in this decision highlighting the lack of agency for women in a patriarchal society. Panchali feels like an object rather than a person according to her husband indicating how she is treated as a possession in her marriage. Despite her



challenging circumstances Panchali gathers the strength to take a vow to seek revenge upon the Kauravas, who are responsible for the shameful act. Panchali's character in the *Mahabharata* is known for her resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Her story is a reflection of the complex social and cultural dynamics of ancient India and it continues to be a subject of analysis and interpretation in literature and folklore. On the other hand, there are also moments where Draupadi is depicted as being more passive such as when she is forced into polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas brothers or when she is disrobed in the court, initially unable to protect herself from the humiliation.

“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?” (343)

The quote offers a thoughtful analysis of Panchali's character in the novel, highlighting the nuanced portrayal of her personality. Panchali's character is depicted as having a rich and intricate blend of emotions. This complexity likely arises from the challenges and experiences she undergoes throughout the narrative showcasing her depth as a character. Panchali is presented as a role model for female empowerment and courage. Her actions and choices throughout the novel reflect her determination to assert herself and seek justice making her an inspiring figure especially for women. It also proposes that Panchali's death serves as a form of liberation and resolution of the contradictions within her identity. Her passing may symbolize her release from the complexities and challenges of her life potentially offering her character closure and peace.

Draupadi displayed respect for elders and addressed them with reverence, even when faced with challenging situation. She upheld the cultural norms and customs of her time, including her role as a devoted wife to the Pandavas brother and her commitment to her family's honor. Draupadi is celebrated for her adherence to ethical values and her strong character in the *Mahabharata* serving as an enduring symbol of righteousness and virtue in Indian culture and mythology.

Draupadi is considered a feminist icon by her cultural and ethical values. Her story is seen as a representation of the struggles women face in a patriarchal society and her determination to fight for her rights and dignity is admired. Younger generations often see Draupadi as a symbol of strength, resilience and empowerment. Her refusal to accept injustice and her willingness to question authority resonate with those who appreciate strong female characters who assert themselves. Not only now, but also ten years later Draupadi is a wonderful example.

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