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**Liminality and the Ritual in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions**

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**Abstract:** 'Liminality' is an anthropological term which refers to the events happening at the limen (threshold) of a ritual as understood by cultural anthropologists in the early twentieth century. The term was restricted to the domain of anthropology until very recently, when scholars like Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra found common grounds to associate the concept of 'liminality' to Sociology. The term has since been used in disciplines like Spatial Studies to understand the contemporary society and individuals. This paper takes into account Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions, which is based on the epic Mahabharata, and attempts to portray the protagonist, Draupadi, as a liminal being describing how she has been in a liminal stage for her entire life. The paper attempts a close reading of Divakaruni's novel with a liminalist critique and divides the life of Draupadi, as shown in the novel, into multiple rituals to establish Draupadi as a liminal being and through Draupadi, present the case of humans in general as existing in liminal spaces.

**Keywords:** liminality, myth, ritual, subversion

**Introduction:**

The concept of liminality in anthropological terms was suggested by French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (Rites of the Passage) published in 1909. Gennep studied French folklore and rural cultures and observed that every simple society followed a lifestyle which was heavily laden with rituals. Every ritual consisted of procedures to be

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followed in a certain order. Usually, these rituals would be attended by the entire community and a certain subject would be the center of said ritual. The subject would follow a passage to complete a transition in their identity and there would be rites marking the passage into the new phase of identity. Liminality refers to those moments of transition (in-between) from one stage to another where a person is standing on the threshold of losing the older self and transforming into the next. Gennep divided the passage into three sub-categories — “preliminaire” or pre-liminal, “luminaire” or liminal and post-liminal (Gennep 1960). Pre-liminal stage is when the ritual hasn’t begun yet while the post-liminal stage is when the ritual has ended. The liminal stage is while the ritual is going on and consists of the moments of transition, disorientation, and ambiguity. This liminal stage is the mid-point between the starting point and the ending point.

British cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, elaborated the concept of liminality in his 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols*, in the essay entitled “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage”. Talking about liminality in contemporary times, as a theory which has developed and expanded considerably for over a century, often takes the generalized stance of ‘threshold’ narratives. In doing so, countless instances of so-called ‘liminal’ situations can be conjured up which have no ritualistic bearings and according to Jasper Balduk “it is questionable whether we can call something ‘liminal’ if no ritual is involved” (Balduk 2008).

To bring liminality out of the ritual process and into everyday life, Danish anthropologist Bjarne Thomassen in his book *Liminality and The Modern: Living Through the In-Between*(2014) suggests:

On one hand, the term (Liminality) can and must be given an extremely narrow and technical delimitation as belonging to the middle stage in concretely acted out ritual passages, on the other hand it is also evident that liminality lends itself to a wider application, as the term captures something essential about the imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness. (Thomassen2014)

Thomassen further adds that liminality is about how human beings experience and react to change. His study elucidates how human beings/ society react to change, those moments of transitoriness which involves ambiguity, anxiety, confusion and disorientation. Liminality, according to Thomassen, involves all these emotions and they last until one reaches the post-liminal stage. Thomassen’s critique allows for an application of liminality into cultural studies and readings of texts outside of anthropology.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author and poet, currently working as the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor for the creative writing program at the University of Houston. She

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was Born on 29th July 1956 in Kolkata and studied there until her graduation. She completed her BA in 1967 from the University of Kolkata and flew to the United States to pursue her MA and Ph. D. degrees. She is the co-founder and former president of Maitri (a helpline for south Asian women dealing with domestic violence). Divakaruni started her writing career as a poet and soon after started writing short stories. Her first published work was the collection of stories *Arranged Marriage*, which won a lot of appreciation and accolades. Since then, she has written numerous novels and short stories. Some of the notable works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *The Last Queen* (2021). All these novels narrate the stories of strong female protagonists and walks through the hardships of womanhood. Divakaruni is renowned to voice out strong female protagonists. Her recent works have been focused on the queens or characters from the history and mythology which reflect a feminist critique.

**Literature Review:** This work takes into consideration Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) as the primary text. The protagonist and narrator of the story is Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas in the epic *The Mahabharata*. Some call her Panchaali, some call her Draupadi while others call her Yajnaseni. The number of her names is no match to the different ways she has been misinterpreted through. Draupadi is a complex character and the urge to decipher why she did what she did was the driving force for this research. The theory of 'liminality' sits perfectly with Divakaruni's Draupadi because not only was her life the result of a successful ritual but also can be looked at as one grand ritual. This shall be discussed further in the paper. This research paper involves two major segments—one is a concept while second is the character. This paper talks about Draupadi as a liminal being where her entire life is considered to be a ritual. The primary question is—why do we talk about Divakaruni's Draupadi as opposed to the Draupadi of the epic?

*The Palace of Illusions* is a re-telling of *The Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. It narrates her story from her birth alongside her twin brother, Dhristadyumna. While some events made it to sage Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, some were too intimate to be known by the world. While some still hold Draupadi as a miscreant and blame her for inflicting a war such as *The Mahabharata* upon the world, some are still contemplating her actions and justifying why she did what she did. Her life from being a princess to the Queen of her 'Palace of Illusions' is wonderfully logged, and every account is narrated with effective details which makes the narration feminine and reasonable. Draupadi, when she becomes the Queen, is disrobed and her husbands are cheated out of their father's kingdom. This is what ignites the fire of revenge in her soul, and

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she is finally avenged in the great war. The Palace of Illusions paints a clear picture of Draupadi and tries to justify her character from a contemporary lens. As mentioned earlier, Divakaruni's works vocalize the hardships that queens of different times have been through. In their entire lifetime, these queens have been in a state of ambiguity and this papers highlights the heroine of the Mahabharata, queen Draupadi from 'The Palace of Illusions' and follows her life from her birth to her death describing how it was all a grand ritual and if she can be looked at as a liminal being.

The secondary texts referred to in this study consist of Arnold van Gennep's Rites of the Passage, published in 1909 and translated in 1960; Victor Turner's developments into the theory of liminality as expounded in his books *The Forest of Symbols* (1970) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (1995); and Bjørn Thomassen's critique of traditional liminality and meditations on a contemporary understanding of liminality considering the shift from simple to complex societies in his book *Liminality and The Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014). Some other sources which have been referred to get an understanding of the academic research already done on this work include Dr Abhisarika Prajapati and Akhila Variyar's paper titled "Myth and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*" published in *VEDA'S Journal of English Language and Literature* in 2018; and Dr S. Ambika and S.A.P.C. Induja's article titled "A Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* as a Discourse on Marginalization and Rebirth" published in *Smart Moves Journal IJELLH* in 2019. All these authors have contributed significantly in their respective field of expertise, and this research paper can be said to be a cross between the two—theory of Liminality and Divakaruni's *Draupadi*. While there have been various studies on both the topics respectively, this study observes the life of Draupadi through the concept of liminality.

This research project looks at liminality through a ritual as it is supposed to be as suggested by Arnold van Gennep but the rituals which we refer to are not just the traditional rituals but also the life-changing events that occurred in the life of Panchaali according to Divakaruni's text. This research highlights the drastically transforming events which unfolded in Draupadi's life considering them as rituals and discussing her life as a liminal existence. Towards the end, we will be able to find out if Draupadi can be looked as a liminal being. This research also aims to introduce the concept of liminality into different disciplines so that researchers may apply this concept into readings of different works and throw light on the liminal stage in different characters or events.

Research methodology, design, and scope of the study: This research is a product of my curiosity towards mythology, especially *The Mahabharata*. Ever since I heard *The Mahabharata* as

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a kid, I wanted to dig deeper, unearth the secrets of every single character from the epic. Though I found reasonable justification to a lot of characters, the story of Draupadi remained skeptical for me. I read a couple of novels about Draupadi but *The Palace of Illusions* caught my attention. I picked up this book for my research because it is bold and fearless. Draupadi is portrayed not just as a feminist but also as an iconoclast. This is how female characters have been in the past too but not every author chooses to challenge the stereotypes and unveil the bold truth. This research uses content analysis as a methodological tool to draw parallels between the events unfolding in the narrative of the text to rituals through a close reading technique.

As my research set in motion, I realized there were various works done on the subject, however an anthropological perspective of the protagonist's identity had not been adequately explored. I found the concept of liminality intriguing in this regard and it blended well with the chosen character. This paper tries to ritualize every event in the life of Draupadi as this paper goes back to the roots of liminality that is a 'Ritual'- as suggested by Arnold van Gennep. According to Gennep, the presence of liminality can be questioned without the presence of a ritual. Thus, this paper looks at the events narrated in *The Palace of Illusions* as observed from the perspective of rituals. Another methodology used for this research is Content Analysis, which acts as a great tool to understand the co-relations in the text and to observe how the concepts are communicated in the novel. Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions*, is seen contemplating her roles as a woman:

Sometimes, just before I fell into the blankness of sleep, it seemed that everything I'd lived until now has 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 in the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lesson he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance— none of them were the true Panchali. If not, who was I? (Divakaruni 2008)

As concluded from the above reference, Panchaali has been in different roles throughout her life yet none of them was her true self. Her roles and identity kept changing which is why this research paper is aiming to justify her as a Liminal Being.

The scope of this study is to open dimensions in the reading of a novel through the lengths of spatiality and liminality. These concepts shouldn't be bound only till the domain of anthropology and can be used as a perspective to read and perceive other literary works in literature and otherwise. Bjørn Thomassen has brought the concept of liminality into socio-cultural

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discipline and this research opens the scope to literature and characters. Every character can be seen as liminal in any text, one has to follow its journey and find the stages of liminality.

The multiple liminalities of Draupadi: The way in which the novel is structured is not essentially in a linear pattern with each chapter directly linked in plot to the next. Rather each chapter is dedicated to a certain memory or character associated with the life of Draupadi and hence the narrative is framed in an episodic manner. The story begins in medias res, as is the epic tradition, not with the birth of the protagonist, but with the remembrance of it while Draupadi interacts with her Dhairya ma, and the narrator seems to be the protagonist but with the knowledge of all that is to pass, hence suggesting a voice that comes from much further ahead in time. The narrative, therefore, exists at the juncture of past, present, and future, where each episode adds to the overarching plot while itself being distinct from the other episodes in her life. This structure paves the way for a reading that does not root itself into a singular solid stance, but rather keeps flitting from one to the other, and hence the very nature of the text takes a liminal approach from a reader's perspective.

The life of Draupadi as manifested in *The Palace of Illusions* is no ordinary journey. If we ritualize the events which transpired in her life, we see the three stages of liminality continuously occurring in a loop. Her life begins with a ritual—Dhruv (her father) organized a grand ritual to please the gods and receive, as a boon, a child who would avenge him for his insult. Pleased by his dedication, the gods glorified his prayers with a son—Dhristadyumna and a daughter—Draupadi. While this is the pre-liminal stage for the ritual had been successful, the birth of Draupadi is the commencement of a new ritual altogether. The first ritual of her life starts with her birth where the pre-liminal stage is her life prior to this one and she physically taking this new form, that is Draupadi, is the liminal stage while the shift in identity to finally becoming the princess, daughter and sister posits as the post-liminal stage. The rituals where she is seen truly liminal throughout the narrative are—Birth, Swayamvar, Marriage, Disrobing, Exile, War, Coronation, and Death. In all these rituals, there is a shift in her identity.

The post-liminal stage of one ritual is the pre-liminal stage of the next ritual. Therefore, the post-liminal stage of the birth is the pre-liminal stage of swayamvar. Before moving to the next stage it is necessary to understand the birth as being the first of the many rituals. Draupadi's birth is a result of a ritual performed by King Dhruv and all the people in the kingdom of Panchaal. As Turner mentions, the subject of a ritual follows certain rules which don't apply to anyone else, in the King's ritual for revenge against his friend, Drona, all the participants consider fast until Dhruv and Draupadi come out of the fire. Her stepping from one world to the other is not smooth



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since she is shown to fall on her dress more often than not. Even in birth, Draupadi is the most important result according to the 'voices', as well as the least wanted one by her father. This marks the liminal condition that she experiences, thrust into a new life where she would have to learn the ways of the royal household to assert herself. Even her color at birth marginalizes her and makes her look for a sense of belonging in an environment that seems to create differences based on color.

After her birth, Draupadi grows up as a princess and is given tutorship by Dhai ma. The exploration of her past also comes in the form of a ritual which the reader figures out as a collaborative storytelling, where each voice completes the other among Draupadi, Dhai ma, and Dhristadyumna. These rituals in storytelling and memory generation become the pre-liminal stage leading up to the liminality experienced in the Swayamvar phase of her life. Draupadi is liminal in the swayamvar because of the ambiguity with the fact that she doesn't know whom she is going to marry. While in the liminal stage, there is the ritual of hitting a fish in the air by looking at its reflection in the water using one of the strongest bows. While the post-liminal stage is her getting married to a Brahmin thus she becomes a wife and gets a new identity at the end of this ritual. The next ritual commences with the end of this ritual which is the marriage. The pre-liminal stage of the marriage is her identity as the wife of a Brahmin and the liminal stage is her acquiring of the knowledge that she must marry five brahmins which are in fact the five Pandavas. The post-liminal stage of the ritual of marriage is her gaining a new identity as a queen and the wife of the five Pandavas.

The pre-liminal stage of the next ritual, disrobing, is her status as a queen, the liminal stage is Draupadi being dressed and undressed at the same time which is the most liminal she can be at that point. She is still a queen but her situation cannot be dignified as one that of a queen. Though her body is partially covered but her honor and pride is being ripped off. The post-liminal stage of this ritual is her shift of identity to an outcast. The Pandavas along with Draupadi are sent to exile as a punishment for thirteen years. Here commences the exile where Draupadi is living neither in the city nor in the village but in a forest and she is constantly moving from one place to another. She doesn't belong anywhere and this stage of 'not belonging' anywhere is the stage of liminality. The post-liminal stage of this ritual is the shift of her identity to being royals again at 'Matsya' kingdom before the commencement of the war. "Truly it was a transient world we lived in. Yesterday in a palace, today on the road, tomorrow- who knew?" (Divakaruni 2008)

The next ritual is the war which, according to Arnold van Gennep, is considered liminal in itself. During a war, the entire society can be seen as liminal. During the war, Draupadi is in the

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role of a wife, daughter, mother and sister yet she cannot assume these roles because she doesn't have the authority to change anything from it. The war leads to the coronation where Draupadi's role shifts to becoming a queen, yet she is liminal because she is a queen without the power, she has a kingdom filled with widows and children. The war drained out the funds and resources of Hastinapur, which is now not a powerful kingdom as it earlier used to be. She has to build the foundation which will build a proper civilization in Hastinapur. Thus the coronation is liminal because even though she is a queen at the end of this ritual, she does not have a flourishing kingdom to rule upon.

The final ritual is 'Death'. The epiphany she comes across while slipping into death is what makes her liminal in this final ritual of her life. She realizes that her life was supposed to unfold the way it did and Krishna prepared her for this life before she even took birth. As observed in every ritual— there is a shift of identity, and it can be observed in this final ritual too. Where the pre-liminal stage is her identity as a queen, wife, mother, sister and daughter, in the post-liminal stage she is truly 'Draupadi'. This epiphany is her self-discovery. Where all her life she has been in several roles and been liminal, this final ritual leads her way to her 'true self' and with this she slips into the sweet release of death. In those moments of death she is her true self one last time, as accounted in *The Palace of Illusions*:

As his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable- but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet for the first time, I'm truly Panchali. (Divakaruni 2008)

It is in these final moments that she acknowledges her identity as Draupadi and enters into the afterlife. Therefore, in all these episodes of her life as narrated by Divakaruni, Draupadi can be seen as liminal.

**Conclusion:** In this novel, Draupadi is seen liminal in all the rituals but if we look at the life of Draupadi as one grand ritual inclusive of all the mini-rituals which have discussed so far then we can discuss further the existence of Draupadi as a 'Liminal Being' in this life. If the life of Draupadi (as a whole) from her birth till her death is considered as one grand ritual then the pre-liminal stage of this grand ritual would be her previous life and the post-liminal stage is her afterlife which will be her union with Karna as mentioned in the text. Thus, the life of Draupadi can be seen liminal which justifies Draupadi as a Liminal Being.



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Draupadi's life is an integration of various rituals. The post-liminal stage of one ritual is the pre-liminal stage of another. Thus, her life as a whole can be looked upon as one grand ritual. The pre-liminal stage of this life would be her death in the previous life whereas the post-liminal stage of this life is her birth in the afterlife where she unites with Karna. Therefore, the discussions and arguments presented so far justify Draupadi as a Liminal Being. This understanding is not simply limited to the character and status of Draupadi but extends to humankind in general. Just like Divakaruni hints at a possible afterlife of Draupadi, which indicates another plausible previous life, in which this present life is a liminal zone of flux and in-betweenness, it can be the case with anyone in the human world, hence hinting at a supra-consciousness about one's presence beyond the physical reality, something that the Mandukya Upanishad calls 'turiya' (Hume 1921). The state of 'turiya' itself is presented as a state that is neither waking, nor sleeping, nor dreaming and yet passing through and infusing with all these states, hence being truly liminal.

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