

**Decoding Society Through Narrative: Barthesian Codes in Chitra
Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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Article Received: 08/12/2024

Article Accepted: 14/01/2025

Published Online: 16/01/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.104

Abstract:

Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970) prescribes five different structuralist codes to analyze a text. Consequently a numbers of layers of meaning are revealed. Structuralism tries to unfold the structures by placing them in the larger context of their existence. Applying structuralism is an attempt to reduce the immense complexity and diversity of a work of fiction, by looking into structure, symbol, and design of the text. The Proairetic code refers to the actions or events taking place in the story; the Hermeneutic code creates an enigma or suspense in the reader; the Cultural code explains the common knowledge of the reader outside the text; the Semic code helps in analyzing the connotative meaning by adding meaning or interpretation to the denotative meanings and helps in developing the character and theme of the text; and the Symbolic code develop the theme of the text but on a larger scale. The present paper would attempt analysis of text *The Palace of Illusions* of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's in the light of the codes prescribed by Roland Barthes. The novel is the interpretation of the episodes of The Mahabharata from the point of view of Panchaali. The approach of the paper is based on the five codes identified by Barthes in *S/Z*. It would focus on human culture relating it to overarching system and structure.

Keywords: structuralism, codes, sign, language

Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970), under the structuralist approach, prescribes five different codes to analyze a text. In the process of doing this analysis, the number of layers is revealed. Structuralism understands the human elements by placing them in the larger context of where they belong. The larger context is explained and examined through the system of codes.

Applying structuralism is an attempt to reduce the immense complexity and diversity in fiction by the operations of the five codes, which work in five different directions, commenting on the structure, symbol, and design of the text. Through this, the presence of parallels echoes, reflections, patterns, and contrasts are seen in the text, where the parallel is the plot of the text, echoes are the structure, reflections are the characters, contrasts are the situations or circumstances in the text and patterns is the language of the text, through this the narration becomes highly schematized and methodological.

Discussing the five codes given in S/Z, the first code is *the Proairetic code*, which refers to the actions or events taking place in the story. It builds tension by indicating events or actions that show that something is going to happen. This brings curiosity to the reader and helps them know what will happen next. This attracts the interest of the reader. Second is the *Hermeneutic code*, which creates an enigma or suspense in the reader; it is related to the Proairetic code. It refers to the elements of the story without fully explaining the truth. The truth remains a mystery; it is intentionally avoided and is revealed in the last scenes where all loose ends are tied off. Third, *cultural code* explains the common knowledge of the reader, which is outside the text. It deals with the truth that cannot be challenged, something that is canonical work and founded as the truth. Fourth *Semic code*, this code helps in analyzing the connotative meaning by adding meaning or interpretation to the denotative meanings. It helps in developing the character and theme of the text. It provides richness in the style of the text, which the author uses to print pictures with relatively great imagination. The way the authors do these shows his/her writing skills. Fifth, *symbolic code* develops the theme of the text but on a larger scale. It is related or similar to Semic code, but it works on a wider track, with deeper sets of meaning and broadly organized semantic meaning. It also involves the contrasts and pairing related to binary polarities.

Analysis of the Text ‘The Palace Of Illusions’ through the Codes:

The text ‘Palace of Illusions’ is very appropriate to be taken for the application of the five codes, as it holds mostly all the aspects of the approach. The text is full of events, memories, imageries, mysteries, structures, symbols, myths, cultural aspect and characters which help in fulfilling the motive of the analysis. The five codes can be applied on the text at many places and would be appropriate if dealt separately.

Probiotic code:

In the first section, 'Fire,' Dhai Ma, the nurse of Panchaali, narrates the story of her brother's and her own birth to Panchaali: *here is the son you asked for.*

“He’ll bring the vengeance you desire, but it’ll break life into two.”

This develops an interest in the mind of the reader to know about the reason for the birth of the child and the desire he has to fulfill, which is revealed in the third section, 'Milk,' when Panchaali narrates the story of how Drona and their father became enemies and reveals the reality that the vengeance is killing Drona. Panchaali says that

“And then you were called into the world, Dhri. So that what started with milk could end one day in blood”.

In the sixth section, 'incarnation,' when Panchaali's elder sister Sikhhandi suddenly appears. She meets Panchaali and says

“little sister, I thank you from the depth of my soul for what you'll do for me.”

This raises the curiosity of the reader to know the reason behind the thanks Panchaali receives from her sister. The truth is revealed at the end of the same section when Sikhhandi is leaving the palace, and Panchaali asks her about it. Sikhhandi says

“I thanked you because you'll help me fulfill my destiny. You'll bring about the Great War, where I'll meet Bheeshma and kill him”.

To fulfill their desires, Panchaali's father arranges a swayamvar for her. In section seventh, 'Fish,' when Panchaali is informed about the swayamvar, she gets excited about it, unaware of the motives behind it. Dhri, aware of the future happenings, tells her

“don't get excited. Something always goes wrong in a swayamvar, either while it's happening or later”.

And the happening is exposed in the twelfth section 'song' when the swayamvar takes place and Karan who is considered as the enemy of Pandava comes forward for the competition. To save the life of Dhri Panchaali insults Karan and from this day the distance between both increases.

In the seventeenth section, 'grandfather' Dhri sends an urgent message to Panchaali and Yudhisthir, seeing a huge army approaching Kampilya. This makes the reader interested in knowing the forthcoming incident. This curiosity of the reader soon comes to an end when Yudhisthir

asserts that it's the army of Hastinapur. To profess the reason for their arrival he says

“Look, Panchaali! Grandfather himself has come to fetch us!”

Moving towards the end of the text, in the twenty-fifth section, 'sari' when all the Pandava with Panchaali and Kunti. Dhai ma comes hurting in, grasping for breath. She cries,

“girl, girl. Terrible things have happened, things you won't believe”.

This brings terror in the readers mind for a short period of time. But the terror increases when the truth is brought to light. Yudhisthir lost Panchaali in gambling with Duryodhan.

Hermeneutics code:

In the third section, 'milk,' while narrating the story of the rivalry between her father and Drona to her brother, Panchaali finish off by thinking that

“there was more to the story. Whose blood, and when, how many times. All that, however, I would learn much later”.

The incidents are revealed in fragments while moving forward to the end of the text. The truth is that in the Great War blood of everyone is shed may be directly or indirectly, some are the loved ones others are the enemies.

In the fifth section, 'Smoke,' Panchaali goes to see a sage with Dhai Ma, where she goes through the reality that she will be marrying five men and will become the reason for the Great War. To this, Panchaali says that to avoid this she will, she will enter a hermitage and will never marry. But in response to this, the sage comes back with,

“Destiny is strong and swift. You can't trick it so easily. Even if you hadn't come seeking it today, it would have found you in time. But in your case, your own nature is going to speed up the process. They are your pride, your temper. Your vengefulness”.

The truth comes in front in various stages at different time. While coming to the end every aspect of the statement fulfills itself and proves the saying true.

In the eighth section, 'sorceress,' Panchaali is tutored by a sorceress. She informs Panchaali that,

“I've been sent to fill some of the biggest gaps in your largely useless education”.

This incident carries the happening of future when Panchaali will be married and will have to live in huts, forests, eat fruits, sometimes would have to live without food. Primarily she was intentionally sent to make Panchaali strong enough to endure the huddles she has to face in future. These situations can be seen throughout the text.

In the ninth section, the 'portrait,' the painter shows paintings of the kings who are coming to the swayamvar to Panchali, and Krishna asks the painter to show other paintings also. To this, the painter responds and asks whether he should bring the painting of Balaram and Krishna. This provokes Panchaali to think. Seeing Panchaali lost in thoughts, Krishna smiled and said,

"Don't worry, Krishna, I'm not going to compete against my friend Arjun. Nor will Balaram. We know your destiny leads you elsewhere."

This makes the reader think about the destiny that waits for Panchaali. All this comes in the knowledge of the reader but in episodic form. This is done intentionally to keep the reader engaged in the story.

In the twelfth section, 'song' during swayamvar, when Arjun comes forward to participate in the task, Panchaali insults him intentionally by asking him the name of his father to save the life of her brother.

"In the face of that question, Karna was silenced. Defeated, head bowed in shame, he left the marriage hall. But he never forgot the humiliation of that moment in full sight of all the kings of Bharat. And when the time came for him to repay the haughty princess of Panchaal, he did so hundredfold".

This will be seen in section twenty-fifth, 'Sari', when Duryodhan wins Panchaali in gambling and insults her and her husband in front of everyone. Duryodhan asks Dussasan to remove Pandava's clothes and jewelry. At that time, Karna will take the revenge. He said to Dussasan,

"Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too".

Semic code:

In the eleventh section, 'Scorpion' when Dhri tells Panchaali the story of Karna against the wish of Krishna. He tells her that there are two reasons for letting her know about Karna because,

"one is that the unknown is always more fascinating than the known. But also, I want you to realize that Karna is cursed. Anyone joined to him will become cursed, too. I don't want that to happen

to you- because you're my sister, but also because you're born to change history. You don't have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary starstruck girl. The consequences of your action may destroy us all".

Through this, the character of Dhoni is developed. He is not only a responsible brother but a true believer in prophesy. He doesn't want Panchaali to think about Karan because he believes that this will get diverted from her role in this life. This not only just draws the character of Dhri but also generates the theme of the text by focusing on the reason for Panchaali's birth. This represents that she is not born ordinary and not for some ordinary task.

The fourteenth section, 'Brinjal,' presents Panchaali's married life and her encounter with Kunti. The reason that makes Panchaali marry all five Pandavas is Kunti's rearing. Panchaali comes to know about her when Kunti declares to her sons that,

"all through my life - even in the hardest of times - everything I said. I made sure it was done. I told myself I'd bring you up as princes in the hall of your forefathers, and no matter how much harassment I faced, I held on to my promise. Sons, if you value what I did for you, you must now honor my word. All five of you have to marry this woman".

This represents the character of Kunti. The character of Kunti signifies strength, her strong will to bestow her sons the real honor and place they belong to. This even illustrates her anticipations for her sons. In section eighteen, 'River' Panchaali lives through many different conditions. She says,

"Truly, it was a transient world we live in. Yesterday in a palace, today on the road, tomorrow-who knew? Perhaps I would find the home that had eluded me all my life. But one thing was certain: the currents of history had finally caught me up and were dragging me headlong. How much water would I have to swallow before I came to a resting place"?

These lines represents the life every mankind live which is full of uncertainty. Panchaali here indirectly suggests the thought that is not subjective but experienced by everyone at some point in time. She builds up the idea that everything done comes back to us.

In the twenty-ninth section, 'visitations,' Panchaali asks Krishna why don't the god ever appear to her. Is it because she is a woman? To this, Krishna consoles her by saying,

“you have the drollest notion. Why do you think that should matter to the gods, who are beyond gender”?

Panchaali has acknowledged that Arjun received astray from god and even got embraced by them. She says,

“Having embraced God, how could Arjun still care about gaining astras, no matter how powerful they were? If I'd been in his place, I wouldn't have wanted anything else”. To this Krishna replies, ***“Then you're a lot wiser than most of us”!***

This draws the character of Panchali in comparison of Arjun who is considered as the world's greatest warrior. It pulls out the contrast between both. This also portrays the wittiness of Panchali.

In section thirty two 'field' Panchaali filled with the feeling of vengeance is observing the preparation of war, when she notices Dhri and her sons.

“I ached to see them, to hold them if they'd let me, to find out more about the young men they'd become- what interested them, what they did in their leisure time, whether they were contemplating marriage. In the last twelve years, we'd spoken to each other only a few times, and never at length. I wished they'd decided to spend this last evening with me, then pushed the thought away”.

Panchaali here is seen very different and emotional. The motherhood arouses in her heart, which was hidden under the vengeance and anger she had, now she wants to show all her affection to her sons. This is a new growth in the character of Panchaali.

Symbolic code:

In section second 'blue' Panchali gathering all her courage asks Krishna about his opinion on her complexion which can prohibit her from changing the history. On this Krishna said

“a problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself”.

This scene symbolizes the reality of the life and the existing humankind convictions. It also renders the knowledge of Krishna which he would be showcasing throughout the text. Specially to make Panchali aware of the life she is living and would live in future. This also symbolizes the upcoming life of Panchaali.

In section nineteen ‘palace’ Panchaali with her five husbands put up a palace which she will finally call her palace. When the time comes to name the palace they all have a long discussion. When it comes to Panchali she has her own views for it. She looks at Maya the draftsman and says,

“This creation of yours that’s going to be the envy of every king in Bharat -we’ll call it the Palace of Illusions”.

It demonstrates the whole symbol of the text. It represents the title of the text, the symbol of the main reason which will be responsible for the great happening in the history. It also symbolizes the quality of the palace which is full of chimera, trickery magic, and sensational to the visitor.

In the section twenty seventh ‘tales’ living in exile Panchaali develops more anger towards her husband’s for their muddle. She suppresses her feelings deep down in her heart and shows her annoyance towards them so that they will be filled up with the sentiments of taking revenge from the Kaurava. When Dhri tries to make her feel better by reminding her about her childhood and the person she was before marriage, her emotions roll up but she tries to hide her tears. She doesn’t want to hurt her brother and keeps her thoughts to herself thinks,

“She’s dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined”.

This symbolizes the character Panchaali has dwelled into and the abhorrence filled in her for the loved ones she once had. It also focuses on the theme of the text that is the intense rationale of the Great War.

The symbols become more strong and appealing while moving towards the end of the text as all the free knots are tied to each other. In section thirty six ‘wheel’ portrays the experience of Panchaali encountering the war specially the death of Karan. The description of Vyasa in Mahabharata is different as Panchaali reveals. She expresses her experience,

“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. Before it soared into the sky and disappeared, it grew into a great radiance around me. A feeling emanated from it that I have no words for. It wasn’t sorrow or rage. Perhaps, freed of its mortal bondage, Karna’s spirit knew what I hadn’t ever been able to tell him”.

It is a symbol of eternal love which dwells in the heart of Panchaali and through this incident it also express that Karan also carves for Panchaali's love. This is a big symbol of the text and human existence. Love is the most fascinating and eminent part of mankind.

In section thirty eight 'pyre' Gandhari and Dhritarashtra felt repentant for the curse they gave. Krishna consoles them and asks them to be fair and honor the law of nature. When Dhritarashtra insists on cremating his dead by himself Krishna says,

"You call them mine, and you call the others theirs. For shame! Hasn't this been the cause of your troubles ever since the fatherless sons of Pandu arrived at Hastinapur? If you'd seen them all as yours to love, this war would never have occurred"

This incident showcases the reality behind the Great War. It is the symbol of the life of every being. Everything which happens in life has some or other connection with the past. It is the Karma which leads one's life. The actions repay in the same life. This incident indirectly utters the reason of the death of the sons of the blind king and the sufferings of the survivors.

Cultural code:

In the fourth section 'cosmology' the tutor of Dhri asks him to tell about the form of the world to this he replies,

"Above are the heave, abode of Indra and the gods who sit around his throne. There, in the center of the seven worlds peopled by celestial being, lies the milky ocean on which Vishnu sleeps, waking only when the earth grows overburdened with unrighteousness. Below it stretches our earth, which would tumble into the great void if it were not supported upon the hoods of Sesha, the thousand-headed serpents. Further below is the underworld, where the demons, who hate the light of the sun, have their kingdom"

This is a cultural belief shown in the text. It is believed from the ancient time that there are five divisions from heaven to the underworld.

In twelfth section 'song' when Panchaali walk across the hall where the swayamvar will take place. She narrates the settlement of visitors as,

"Across the hall, spectators were grouped according to the caste. The vaishya sector was marked by blue line banner painted with a merchant ship. The Sudra banner depicted farmers harvesting wheat. The Brahmins had the best seats, up front, with fat, tassled

bolsters to lean on. Their banner, a priest making a fire offering, was made of white silk”.

This demonstrates the caste system present in the society and the division made through different factor. Brahmins hold the upper class while the lowest class is of the vaishya. The banners represent the activities in which respective caste is involved.

In section fourteen ‘brinjal’ when Kunti asks her sons to marry Panchaali Arjun seems unsatisfied with the decision. He blurt out,

“Mother, how can you ask us to do this? It’s contrary to dharma”.

Dharma is considered the central part of life and society. It is because of the dharma certain facets are arranged and maintained for the virtuous progress of mankind. Dharma is a cultural belief which controls the life of every being.

In section twenty one ‘afterlife’ the boundaries of afterlife are showcased.

“Depending on their deeds, the dead can be dispatched to many different abodes. Fortunate Brahmins are sent to Brahmaloaka. The best among Kshatriya go to Indraloaka. For evildoers, there are one hundred and thirty six levels of hell, each corresponding to a particular sin, all of which our scriptures describe with great relish. Virtuous women were sent directly to their next birth, where if they are lucky, they reincarnated as men”.

This portrays the picture of different Lokas present afterlife. It is believed and even written in the Holy Scriptures that this is decided by one’s actions that afterlife the sole will go to heaven or hell.

In section thirty nine ‘ash’ Bheeshma lying on the death bed teaches Yudhisthir the art of kingship keep aside his all pains. He says,

“A ruler should know how to conceal his own weakness. He should choose his servants carefully. He must cause dissensions among the noblemen in his enemy’s kingdom. He should be forgiving, but not excessively so, for the men of evil heart would take advantage of him. His innermost thought must be concealed even from his nearest ones”.

It represents the art which a king should know to be a successful. The king should have all the qualities to be fair in court or political matters and even for the citizens. This describes the cultural picture of a flourishing king who is keen and kind. Bheeshma delivers the knowledge to Yudhisthir as he feels it to be his responsibility to make him a victorious king.

Through the analysis it can be concluded that novel ‘The Palace of Illusions’ have every suitable aspect to make the application of the codes judicious. The concept of Roland Barthes is carried out adequately in the paper.

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