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A Critical Analysis of Mythical Stereotypes in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The palace of illusions.*

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Abstract:
Citra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions,* is a retelling of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, from the perspective of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, as she narrates her own story. This article shows the mythical stereotypes present in the novel that are analysed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the book Mahabharata. By a a critical analysis of the novel, this article points out and explores various mythical stereotypes that are imposed in the novel such as the ideal woman, who can be a queen or a normal woman in society, rules that the warrior, the struggle between fate and free will, and the intervention of the god should follow. The article also looks into Divakaruni's use of mythical stereotypes to reflect and challenge contemporary societal issues, such as patriarchy, gender roles, and identity. Divakaruni reimagines Indian mythology in The Palace of Illusions, breaking down traditional stereotypes and offering a deeper understanding of its complexity. The novel is not just a retelling of the Mahabharata but also a thoughtful exploration of Indian culture, challenging traditional ideas and presenting a fresh, feminist perspective.

Keywords: Mythology, stereotypes, myth, culture, society, tradition, patriarchy, Mahabharatha, gender, sacrifice, relationship, identity.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* offers a fresh and thought-provoking retelling of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, through the eyes of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. Published in 2008, the novel has gained significant recognition for its detailed and layered portrayal of Draupadi and other key characters. One of the central themes of the book is its exploration of mythical stereotypes, which play a significant role in Indian mythology and culture.

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Mythical stereotypes are the preconceived ideas and expectations associated with mythological figures, events, and themes. These stereotypes have been passed down through generations, shaping how people understand and interpret mythological narratives. In ThePalace of Illusions, Divakaruni challenges, redefines, and reimagines these stereotypes, providing a fresh, feminist lens on the Mahabharata.

This article critically examines the mythical stereotypes present in The Palace of Illusions. It explores how Divakaruni employs, questions, and transforms these stereotypes, offering insights into the rich and complex nature of Indian mythology and culture. Additionally, this analysis investigates how Divakaruni's approach to mythical stereotypes addresses and critiques modern societal issues such as patriarchy, gender roles, and identity. By analysing the intricate relationship between mythical stereotypes and cultural context, this article aims to deepen our understanding of how these stereotypes influence perceptions of mythological stories and characters. It offers a detailed and insightful exploration of *The Palace of Illusions* and its broader significance within Indian mythology and culture.

Mythical stereotypes in Indian mythology

Indian mythology is rich with characters that symbolize various traits and qualities, which have shaped cultural and social values over time. Female stereotypes include Sita, the ideal woman known for her loyalty and self-sacrifice; Mohini, the seductive and charming avatar of Vishnu; Durga and Kali, powerful goddesses embodying protection and destruction; and Savitri, a devoted and loyal wife.

Male stereotypes include Rama and Arjuna as brave heroes, Krishna as a wise teacher, Dasharatha and Indra as just and powerful kings, and Shiva as a detached ascetic. Other characters highlight different aspects of human nature, such as Ravana, the villainous figure symbolizing pride and evil; Narada, the clever trickster; Garuda, the loyal divine messenger; and Rakshasas and Asuras, representing chaos and opposition. These mythical archetypes not only enrich ancient stories but continue to influence Indian culture and values today.

Mythical stereotypes in Indian mythology have helped preserve cultural traditions and pass them on to future generations. They often teach moral lessons and guide virtuous behavior, while also fostering a shared national identity. These stereotypes have inspired countless works of art, literature, music, and dance, enriching Indian culture. However, these stereotypes have also reinforced the caste system and social hierarchies, limiting equality. They have often portrayed women in submissive roles and reinforced rigid social norms that restrict individual freedom. Additionally, they can distort historical facts, leading to a skewed understanding of the past.

Mythical stereotypes shape how people see themselves and their roles in society, influencing cultural identity. They evoke strong emotions, from admiration to fear, and

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represent universal human experiences, like desires and anxieties, through psychological archetypes. Mythical stereotypes shape how people see themselves and their roles in society, influencing cultural identity. They stir strong emotions, from admiration to fear, and reflect universal human desires and fears through timeless archetypes. These stereotypes have influenced social norms and values, shaping what society views as acceptable. They also reflect power dynamics and social inequalities while promoting cultural exchange and understanding. At the same time, they can encourage education and critical thinking by prompting people to analyse complex cultural stories. It also influences societal values, defining acceptable behaviour while reinforcing power imbalances and inequalities.

They promote cultural exchange and understanding but sometimes risk misrepresentation. Additionally, they encourage critical thinking by challenging people to analyse India's cultural stories more deeply.

Mythology holds a special place in Indian literature, providing a rich source of inspiration, stories, and characters. It reflects India's deep cultural roots and explores important moral and philosophical ideas. The ancient epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, are key works that have influenced many writers and thinkers over time.

These mythological stories have been retold in different forms, such as poetry, drama, and fiction. Even today, modern writers like R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni use mythological themes in their work. It helps to express timeless truths, universal values, and the essence of Indian culture. It explains life's mysteries and human nature, offering deep insights into human experiences. By using mythology, Indian literature connects with people on a deep level, making it both uniquely Indian and universally meaningful.

Character's challenges faced

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel explores and reinterprets common stereotypes in Indian mythology, offering new perspectives on traditional ideas about culture and characters. Draupadi as an Ideal Woman, the main character, is shown as strong, independent, and determined, yet also caring and loyal to her family. The novel presents her as a modern and feminist take on the traditional image of an ideal Indian woman.

Arjuna The Brave Hero, one of the Pandavas, represents the stereotype of a heroic and noble warrior. However, the novel also shows his insecurities and struggles, making him a more human and relatable character. Duryodhana, the antagonist, is usually seen as the embodiment of evil. Divakaruni gives him a more complex portrayal, exploring his reasons and background, which makes him more than just a villain.

Krishna is shown as a wise guide and spiritual leader. The novel highlights his role as an advisor to the Pandavas and delves into his teachings and philosophy. Kunti, the mother

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of the Pandavas, represents the nurturing and protective mother. However, her character is also shown to be layered, with contradictions and complexities that challenge traditional views of mothers and femininity. The novel challenges many traditional ideas, like the concept of heroism and masculinity by showing Arjuna's doubts and vulnerabilities. It also redefines womanhood by portrayingDraupadi as a strong and independent woman. Through this, Divakaruni offers a fresh and modern view of Indian mythology and culture

The power of myth to shape and reflect cultural values

Myths have always played an important role in shaping and reflecting cultural values. In The Palace of Illusions, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni blends myth, history, and culture to explore Indian mythology and how it influences society. The novel retells the Hindu epic Mahabharata from the viewpoint of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. Through her story, Divakaruni highlights the cultural values of ancient India, particularly the strict rules that controlled women's lives. The book shows how women had little freedom and were expected to follow society's expectations.

At the same time, the novel also reveals how myths influence cultural beliefs. Draupadi's story has been passed down for generations, shaping how women are seen and treated in Indian society. Myths can be used to support traditions and social norms, but they can also be rewritten to challenge them. The characters reflect the cultural values of ancient India. They provide a deep look into human nature and its complexities. The main character represents the traditional Indian ideal of a devoted wife (pativrata), but she also challenges this role by asserting her independence and making her own choices. Draupadi's bond with her brother, Dhrishtadyumna, shows how sibling relationships were important in ancient India. Her friendship with Sudeshna highlights the significance of female support and solidarity in a male-dominated society. Bhima's personality, which is both fierce and compassionate, reflects the cultural acceptance of contradictions in human nature. Meanwhile, Aswatthama- Drona's son serves as a warning against unchecked ambition and the consequences of putting personal gain above morality. These lesser-known aspects of the characters add depth to their stories and showcase the richness of mythology and cultural traditions. Krishna, the divine prince, offers wisdom and guidance, showing the importance of seeking spiritual advice during difficult times. He also symbolises the purity.

Kunti, Draupadi's mother-in-law, represents selfless motherhood, always putting her sons' needs above her own, which reflects the cultural expectation of a mother's sacrifice. On the other hand, Duryodhana serves as a warning against unchecked ambition and arrogance, showing the consequences of privilege and power in a patriarchal society.

These characters, shaped by mythology and cultural beliefs, reveal the complexities of human relationships, desires, and social expectations. Through Divakaruni's storytelling, they feel real and relatable, encouraging readers to think about how myths and culture influence our understanding of ourselves and the world.

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Divakaruni's version of the Mahabharata is a strong example of how myths can be retold to reflect changing values. By giving Draupadi a voice, she questions the traditional, male-dominated versions of the story and challenges the patriarchal beliefs that have shaped Indianculture for centuries. The novel shows that while myths can be used to maintain traditions, they can also be reinterpreted to challenge and change them.

Mythical Stereotypes in relation to the modern world

Draupadi's struggles in *The Palace of Illusions* remain relevant today as women continue to face similar challenges. Her experience of being treated as an object and commodified reflects how women are still objectified in modern society through media, advertising, and even human trafficking.

The patriarchal oppression she endured, such as being gambled away and publicly disrobed, mirrors the restrictions on women's rights and autonomy in many parts of the world. Draupadi's limited freedom to make her own decisions resonates with the struggles women face today in areas like education, employment, and healthcare.

Her resistance against these injustices can be seen as an early representation of the feminist movement, challenging patriarchal systems and advocating for women's empowerment. Draupadi's story is a powerful symbol of women's strength, highlighting the importance of autonomy and breaking traditional stereotypes. Her experiences also draw parallels to modern movements like #MeToo, which fights against patriarchal violence, and the broader fight for women's rights and equality. Her character, reimagined in feminist literature, reflects the ongoing need to amplify women's voices and perspectives to challenge societal biases and empower women today.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* takes a fresh look at Indian mythology, focusing on breaking down traditional stereotypes. Through Draupadi's story, the author challenges conventional ideas about Indian womanhood and presents a feminist perspective on these classic tales. The novel explores how myths can both empower and restrict, shaping how we see ourselves and our roles in society. By delving into Draupadi's complex character, it reveals how women's lives are influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations

In the end, *The Palace of Illusions* is a powerful reflection on the human experience. It encourages readers to question the stories we believe and the stereotypes we maintain, offering a richer, more thoughtful view of Indian mythology and culture.

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