

Reclaiming Myths: Divakaruni's Stories of Strength and Identity

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Abstract

Aim: This research paper aims to study the innovative narrative techniques employed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novels 'Palace of Illusions' and 'The Forest of Enchantments,' focusing on how she navigates traditional literary forms while incorporating indigenous storytelling techniques. These retellings of the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively serve as rich examples of how contemporary authors engage with ancient narratives, infusing them with fresh perspectives and voices.

Methodology and Approaches: Using a **comparative analysis approach**, this paper explores how Divakaruni blends elements of traditional literary forms with indigenous storytelling techniques to craft compelling narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences. Through **close textual analysis** and examination of narrative structure, characterization, and thematic elements seeking to uncover the unique strategies employed by Divakaruni to reinterpret these timeless tales for modern readers. Her incorporation of indigenous storytelling techniques, such as oral storytelling traditions and mythic symbolism adds depth and authenticity to her narratives, while also challenging conventional literary forms.

Outcome: By seamlessly weaving together elements of myth, legend, and history with her own imaginative reinterpretations, Divakaruni creates narratives that are both rooted in tradition and relevant to contemporary concerns. Employing a **feminist literary analysis approach**, this paper scrutinizes Divakaruni's narrative strategies in reimagining Sita and Draupadi, shedding light on their agency, resilience, and individuality.

Conclusions: By exploring Divakaruni's navigation of traditional literary forms and indigenous storytelling techniques in 'Palace of Illusions' and 'The Forest of Enchantments,' this paper offers insights into the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in contemporary literature, and underscores the enduring power of ancient narratives to inspire and provoke thought in the modern world.

Keywords: **Traditional literary forms, Indigenous storytelling techniques, Indian epics, Narrative structure, Cultural reinterpretation**

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is celebrated for her ability to reimagine ancient Indian myths and epics in a contemporary context. "Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments" stand as testament to her prowess in blending tradition with innovation. This paper examines how Divakaruni navigates between these two realms, creating narratives that resonate with modern readers while honoring the rich cultural heritage of India. Reshu Shukla also wrote in one of his researches -*Within the context of the world's mythical heritage, Indian history is a priceless find, with a rich legacy marked by the potent influence of revered goddesses and mythological women. Indian tradition has elevated its women in classical and sacred history more than any other civilization, thus enhancing the appreciation of Indian culture across the world. Indian mythology's outstanding female figures have made a lasting impression by standing for courage, tenacity, and profound understanding.* (Shukla,2024). This clearly emphasizes how rich Indian traditions and Values are , shedding light on how the portrayal of mythological figures influences the thought patterns of the coming generations as we see in the works of Chitra Banerjee. Traditional activities demonstrate a rich cultural tapestry of giving since they are firmly anchored in a sense of duty, morality, and selflessness. The protagonist of the epic Ramayana is Sita, the most revered figure in Hindu mythology. Her unwavering commitment to Lord Rama during the exile, together with her incredible fortitude and hard work during her days in Ashok Vatika, are testaments to her extraordinary level of dedication.

I. Innovative Literary Forms

Divakaruni's novels deviate from traditional retellings by utilizing creative literary techniques, with narration being the prime style. She retells well-known stories from the viewpoint of female protagonists, bringing novel insights to well-known narratives. She breathes new life into old tales by closely examining storytelling strategies, character development, and theme inquiry. Divakaruni writes for ladies who identify as women and are of any ethnicity or religion. Each of her heroines has to navigate the conflicting limits imposed by their society and faith.

She stated in one of the interviews: "My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibilities and Individual happiness which is in a way, at the center of conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, nurture and sacrificing herself for the good of the family and the western concept of self happiness." (Sumathi, P. N. (2013). Diaspora and its Impact in the select novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Shanlax International Journal of English, 1(3).)

Further Chitra Banerjee has greatly emphasized the **Themes of Feminism and Empowerment.**

The need to break the stereotypical attitude is the need of the situation both for the East and the West. Through her characters, the novelist has touched a chord by posing rhetorical questions in the course of the novels to ironically hint at the need for changed perspectives. (Soundarya, S. S.,2018)

One of the most striking features of Divakaruni's works is her portrayal of strong and empowered female characters. In "Palace of Illusions," Draupadi emerges as a resilient and independent figure, while "The Forest of Enchantments" presents Sita as a symbol of endurance and agency. Divakaruni's reinterpretations challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for feminist perspectives.

The term 'feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'femina,' meaning 'woman.' In 1837, Charles Fourier advocated empowerment of women using the French term, *féminisme*. The Oxford English Dictionary (7th Edition) describes feminism as the women's rights movement, promoting parity between the sexes. Adhering to Encyclopedia Britannica's definition, feminism embodies the endeavor for equal opportunities and rights regardless of gender across social, economic, and political landscapes. Feminism is an extensive social and political endeavor actively promoting the cause of gender equality. It endeavors to break down the historically entrenched patriarchal systems that have marginalized women, aspiring to foster a society where both men and women share equal rights, opportunities, and mutual respect.

Draupadi is portrayed as a very skeptical woman, curious about almost everything in the world irrespective of both the material and spiritual world. Even at the very end of the novel, at the time of her last breath during the Mahaprasthan, Krishna commented, "*Skeptical to the last!*" (The Palace of Illusions, 359) After confronting loads of her queries, Krishna mocked, "*Will you never be done with questioning?*" (The Palace of Illusions, 359) Her queries began from the very beginning of her life. While portraying the story of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective in a contemporary post-modern context, Divakaruni deliberately presents various postmodern characteristics in this novel. (Ghosh, T,2020)

II. Comparison with Traditional Texts

In a Hindu household in India the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are integral to the cultural landscape we are exposed to. The reality of the Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (and the retellings of them) is refracted through the individual's interpretation of everyday reality. In this regard, Yuri Lotman (1990) explains, "The spatial picture of the world is many-layered: it includes both the mythological universe and scientific modeling and everyday 'commonsense'." The reader does not approach the epic text with a *tabula rasa* or a set of natural cognitive apparatuses to decode the text; instead, in understanding this historical text, the individual's own 'history of understanding' and the history of the text interact and such a dynamic process brings about new meanings of the text.

A comparative analysis of Divakaruni's novels and the original mythological texts provides insight into how she deviates from or remains faithful to tradition. By juxtaposing key elements of the narratives, this section elucidates the unique contributions of Divakaruni's retellings to the literary landscape. In 'The Forest of Enchantments', she merges feminist literary analysis with the art of **myth reinterpretation**, crafting a story that resonates deeply with both approaches. For instance, The Agni Pariksha, or trial by fire, is a pivotal moment in the epic. Divakaruni presents Sita's pain and anger over being subjected to such a test, emphasizing her emotional strength rather than just her obedience.

"I stepped into the fire, not to prove my purity to Ram, but to show the world that a woman's worth is not determined by a man's suspicion."

Here, Sita reclaims the narrative of the Agni Pariksha, transforming it into a moment of defiance rather than submission.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni destabilizes the focus of the grand narrative through her astounding narration. The novel allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity and challenges the original narrative through contemporary perspectives. The novel begins with Draupadi's birth and progresses along the line of her

life. Panchaali herself becomes the chronicler of her own life and the narrator as well. At the same time, she explores Sita's struggles, desires, and agency, aspects often ignored in conventional retellings.

Additionally, her work criticizes how patriarchal society hinders female autonomy and controls their destiny. As a myth retelling, Banerjee does away with the traditional interpretation of the Ramayana and breathes life into Sita's character. She breaks the age-old notion of Sita as a meek, docile woman who is considered to be the epitome of pativrata in traditional narrative. Divakaruni's Sita is a strong woman who upholds self-respect and dignity.

In one of the depictions, Draupadi has been humiliated by Duryodhan's act of tyranny in the court in front of all the elders. *"I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered saree around me, I demanded help from my husband's"* (PI 191) *She screamed to everybody to rescue her but it is in vain. She sincerely prays to Lord Krishna to save her from the embarrassing position. To prove her virtue and chastity, Lord Krishna consoles her, "None can shame you"* he said if the court represents the society which is insensitive to the shame and humiliation experienced by women. Perhaps it is Lord Krishna or the male feminist who understands women for their suppression. Indian women are usually passive serene and silent, but when injustice arises in the world, they become as furious as fire, abandon their tolerance, and burst out their emotions as goddess Kali. Draupadi damns the Kauravas as Kannaki in Silappadikaran. *"I lifted up my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because I knew that everything; I said until the day. I bathe it in Kauravas blood"* (Chandra, M.T., PI 194)

Further Sita's journey in Sitayan shines light on different aspects of her identity, that of – woman, queen, high-caste, wife, etc. – combine to create unique struggles and opportunities. Chitra Banerjee's masterful storytelling thus emerges as a powerful tool for feminist discourse, inviting readers to delve into the intricate tapestry of societal expectations, power imbalances, and individual agency within the framework of intersectionality. The analysis offers a promising exploration of intersectionality within the context of Indian mythology. (Mondal, K. C. S., Sivapurapu, L., Raj, Y., & Raju)

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fusion of tradition and innovation in "Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments" exemplifies the power of literature to transcend time and culture. By reimagining ancient myths for contemporary audiences, Divakaruni invites readers to explore the timeless themes of love, sacrifice, and redemption in new and thought-provoking ways. Her works serve as a testament to the enduring relevance of mythology and the transformative potential of storytelling. Through her reimagining of ancient Indian epics, Divakaruni not only revitalizes these classic tales for modern readers but also reinterprets them through a feminist lens, thereby challenging traditional narratives and highlighting the voices of female characters often marginalized in the original texts. Her use of a first-person narrative provides an intimate insight into the inner lives of her protagonists, Draupadi and Sita, transforming them from mythic figures into relatable, complex individuals. This narrative choice serves to bridge the gap between ancient cultural heritage and modern sensibilities, making the stories accessible and engaging to a diverse readership.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's fusion of literary forms in "The Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments" exemplifies how tradition and innovation can coexist and enrich one another. Her works stand as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and its capacity to evolve and adapt, offering new perspectives while honoring the timeless essence of the original epics. Through her innovative approach, Divakaruni not only preserves but also revitalizes these ancient stories, ensuring their continued relevance and appeal for future generations.

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