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REWRITING MYTH, REWRITING GENDER: INDIAN POPULAR
FICTION AS FEMINIST INTERVENTION

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Popular Fiction,</i> <i>Gender,</i> <i>Identity,</i> <i>Patriarchy,</i> <i>Culture.</i>	This paper examines how contemporary Indian popular fiction reimagines mythological narratives to challenge and reconstruct gender roles. Focusing primarily on <i>The Palace of Illusions</i> by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni alongside select comparative texts, the paper argues that mythological retellings function as powerful feminist interventions within popular literature. By foregrounding female subjectivity, reclaiming silenced voices, and interrogating patriarchal structures embedded in canonical texts like the Mahabharata, such narratives destabilize traditional gender hierarchies. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from <i>The Second Sex</i> and <i>Gender Trouble</i> , the paper explores how gender is reconstructed as fluid, performative, and historically contingent. Ultimately, the study situates Indian popular fiction within broader debates on gender, authorship, and cultural memory.



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Popular literature has historically occupied an ambivalent position within literary studies, often dismissed as commercially driven, ideologically simplistic, and lacking aesthetic seriousness. Such dismissals, however, obscure the immense cultural work performed by popular narratives, especially in shaping and disseminating dominant as well as resistant ideologies related to gender, identity, and power. In recent decades, scholars influenced by cultural studies have begun to reassess the value of popular literature, recognizing it as a crucial site where meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested. In the Indian context, one of the most dynamic and intellectually fertile developments within popular fiction has been the resurgence of mythological retellings, which reinterpret ancient epics through contemporary socio-political and gendered lenses. These retellings do not function merely as simplified or modernized versions of canonical narratives; rather, they constitute deliberate acts of creative and ideological intervention that challenge the authority and fixity of the original texts. By revisiting foundational works such as the Mahabharata, contemporary authors engage critically with inherited traditions, interrogating the patriarchal assumptions that have historically underpinned these narratives. In doing so, they expose the ways in which myth has been used as a cultural tool to naturalize gender hierarchies and reinforce normative ideals of femininity and masculinity. Female characters who were previously relegated to the margins or represented as symbolic figures, embodying virtues such as sacrifice, chastity, and obedience, are reimagined as complex individuals endowed with voice, desire, and agency. This shift is not merely narrative but epistemological, as it reorients the reader's understanding of the epic itself, foregrounding perspectives that were either silenced or systematically excluded. Such reconfigurations resonate strongly with feminist theoretical concerns, particularly those articulated by thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who questions whether the subaltern can truly speak within dominant discursive frameworks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who emphasizes the importance of contextualizing women's experiences within specific cultural and historical conditions.

Mythological retellings in Indian popular fiction thus emerge as a powerful medium through which these theoretical concerns are translated into accessible narratives. By granting interiority to characters such as Draupadi or Sita, authors challenge the epistemic violence inherent in their earlier representations and open up new possibilities for feminist reinterpretation. Furthermore, these texts participate in a broader cultural negotiation between tradition and modernity, where the authority of the past is neither wholly rejected nor uncritically accepted but is instead reworked to address contemporary anxieties and aspirations. In this sense, popular literature becomes a dialogic space where the past and present intersect, allowing for the rearticulation of gender identities in ways that are both culturally rooted and critically progressive. This paper through a close reading of *The Palace of Illusions*, supported by theoretical insights from *The Second Sex* and *Gender Trouble*, explores how gender is reconstructed. It further situates these narratives within broader cultural and literary contexts, highlighting their role in negotiating tradition and modernity.



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The conceptualization of gender as a socially constructed category forms the foundation of feminist literary analysis. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). This statement underscores the idea that femininity is not an inherent biological trait but a product of cultural conditioning and socialization. Beauvoir’s formulation is particularly relevant in the context of mythological narratives, where gender roles are rigidly codified and idealized. Women are often depicted as embodiments of virtue, sacrifice, and purity, while men are associated with power, action, and rationality. These representations reinforce a binary understanding of gender that privileges masculinity and marginalizes femininity.

Building on Beauvoir’s insights, *Gender Trouble* introduces the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is constituted through repeated acts and performances rather than being a stable identity. Butler writes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body” (Butler 45), emphasizing its fluid and dynamic nature. Thus, when applied to mythological retellings, Butler’s theory allows us to see how gender identities can be reconfigured through narrative reinterpretation. By presenting alternative performances of femininity and masculinity, contemporary authors challenge the naturalization of gender roles and open up possibilities for resistance and transformation.

Traditional mythological narratives have long functioned as powerful instruments of cultural pedagogy, shaping collective consciousness by encoding and transmitting social norms, ethical frameworks, and hierarchical structures across generations. In the Indian context, epics such as the *Mahabharata* occupy a foundational position, not merely as literary texts but as civilizational archives that inform moral imagination and social conduct. However, these narratives are deeply implicated in the construction and reinforcement of patriarchal authority, particularly through their control over narrative voice and perspective. While female characters in the *Mahabharata*—such as Kunti, Gandhari, and Draupadi—play crucial roles in the unfolding of the epic, they are rarely granted narrative autonomy. Instead, their stories are filtered through male narrators and focalized through male consciousness, resulting in representations that are partial, mediated, and often ideologically constrained. This narrative asymmetry produces what may be termed an epistemic marginalization of women, wherein their lived experiences, desires, and interpretations are subordinated to dominant patriarchal discourses.

Draupadi, one of the most compelling and complex figures within the epic, exemplifies this paradox of centrality without voice. Her public humiliation in the Kaurava court—particularly the attempted disrobing—serves as a pivotal narrative moment that catalyzes the eventual war of Kurukshetra. Yet, despite the magnitude of her suffering and its narrative consequences, Draupadi’s own perspective remains strikingly underrepresented. She is constructed less as a fully realized subject and more as a symbolic entity—an embodiment of honor violated and vengeance justified. Her identity is thus subsumed within larger patriarchal narratives of dharma, justice, and masculine retribution, leaving little room for the articulation of her interiority or agency. This reduction of a complex female figure



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to a narrative function underscores the broader tendency of mythological discourse to objectify women, transforming them into carriers of meaning rather than producers of it.

Feminist critics have consistently interrogated this dynamic, arguing that such representations contribute to the systematic erasure of female subjectivity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—is particularly relevant here, as it foregrounds the structural conditions that render marginalized voices inaudible within dominant discourses. Similarly, Uma Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy highlights how gender hierarchies are sustained through cultural narratives that normalize female subordination. By reducing women to symbolic functions, whether as paragons of virtue, objects of desire, or catalysts for male action, mythological texts deny them complexity, agency, and self-representation.

In this context, the act of rewriting myth emerges as a crucial feminist strategy aimed at reclaiming narrative authority and restoring voice to silenced figures. Contemporary retellings that center female perspectives do not merely supplement the original narratives; they fundamentally challenge their epistemological foundations by exposing the partiality and bias inherent in patriarchal storytelling. By reimagining characters like Draupadi as speaking subjects with interior lives, desires, and critical consciousness, these reinterpretations disrupt the authority of canonical texts and open up new possibilities for understanding gender, power, and identity.

The Palace of Illusions offers a radical and deeply introspective reimagining of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, fundamentally transforming her from a silenced object within the narrative into a self-conscious and articulate subject who commands narrative authority. The novel opens with Draupadi's striking declaration, "I was born from fire, and I have always known that fire lives within me" (Divakaruni 5), a metaphor that not only foregrounds her extraordinary origin but also symbolically aligns her with *Shakti*, an elemental force of power, transformation, and resistance. This imagery disrupts traditional representations of femininity as passive, submissive, and self-effacing, instead presenting a protagonist who is acutely aware of her inner strength and latent defiance. By adopting a first-person narrative voice, Divakaruni enables readers to access Draupadi's interior world—her thoughts, anxieties, ambitions, and desires—thereby humanizing a figure who, in the canonical epic, is often reduced to a symbolic function. This narrative strategy simultaneously exposes the limitations of the original text, revealing how its patriarchal framing constrains the articulation of female subjectivity.

One of the most significant and subversive elements of the novel is its nuanced exploration of female desire, a theme largely absent or suppressed in the traditional epic. Draupadi's complex emotional and intellectual attraction to Karna, articulated in her confession that "in some secret corner of my heart, I'd always known that he was the one who would understand me" (Divakaruni 112), challenges the normative construction of women as passive recipients of male attention. Instead, she emerges as an active agent in her emotional life, capable of longing, introspection, and choice, even



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within the constraints imposed upon her. This acknowledgment of desire destabilizes patriarchal ideals of chastity and fidelity, suggesting that female subjectivity encompasses a range of affective experiences that cannot be contained within rigid moral frameworks.

Equally significant is the novel's reinterpretation of the infamous disrobing scene, traditionally framed as a moment of divine intervention that reaffirms moral justice. In Divakaruni's retelling, however, the emphasis shifts from divine rescue to personal resilience. Draupadi's assertion, "I will not question why fate has chosen to crush me. I will use it to make myself stronger" (Divakaruni 190), reframes the episode as one of resistance rather than victimhood, allowing her to reclaim agency even in the face of profound humiliation. This reconfiguration aligns with contemporary feminist discourses that emphasize resilience, self-definition, and the refusal to be reduced to suffering.

Furthermore, Draupadi's polyandrous marriage to the five Pandava brothers is reexamined not as a divinely sanctioned arrangement but as a source of deep psychological and emotional conflict. Her poignant question, "How could I belong to five men and still remain myself?" (Divakaruni 134), encapsulates the fragmentation of identity that results from being simultaneously bound to multiple roles and expectations. This interrogation of selfhood foregrounds the tension between individual autonomy and social obligation, a theme that resonates strongly with modern feminist concerns regarding marriage, identity, and agency. Through these layered reinterpretations, the novel not only restores complexity to Draupadi's character but also transforms her into a site of critical inquiry, where questions of gender, power, and selfhood are continuously negotiated and redefined.

One of the defining features of Indian popular fiction lies in its remarkable ability to negotiate the often fraught tension between tradition and modernity, creating a dialogic space where inherited cultural narratives are neither passively reproduced nor entirely discarded, but actively reinterpreted. Rooted in ancient epics and mythological frameworks, these texts draw upon a shared cultural memory that continues to hold immense symbolic and emotional resonance for Indian readers. At the same time, they are deeply informed by contemporary values, particularly those related to individual agency, gender equality, and selfhood. This dual orientation is especially evident in the characterization of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*, where she emerges as a figure who simultaneously embodies traditional virtues such as loyalty, courage, and a sense of dharma, while also articulating distinctly modern concerns about identity, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment. Her voice reflects an awareness that transcends the temporal boundaries of the epic, allowing her to question, reinterpret, and at times resist the roles imposed upon her.

Equally significant is the novel's language and narrative style, which play a crucial role in mediating between past and present. Divakaruni employs a contemporary idiom that renders the narrative accessible and engaging for modern readers, without stripping it of its cultural depth or historical gravitas. This stylistic choice not only bridges the gap between ancient text and contemporary



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audience but also democratizes the epic, making it available to readers who may not be familiar with its traditional versions. The fluidity of the prose, combined with its introspective tone, invites readers to engage with the narrative on a personal level, thereby enhancing its emotional and intellectual impact. This accessibility, in turn, contributes significantly to the text's popularity and cultural influence, enabling it to function as a site where traditional narratives are reimagined through the lens of modern sensibilities, and where the past is continuously reinterpreted to speak to the present.

While feminist literary analysis has traditionally foregrounded the question of female agency and the recovery of women's voices, it is equally crucial to examine how masculinity itself is reconfigured within contemporary mythological retellings, thereby enabling a more holistic transformation of gender relations. In texts such as *The Immortals of Meluha*, masculinity is no longer represented through the conventional paradigm of stoic heroism, emotional restraint, and unquestioned authority. Instead, male characters are endowed with emotional depth, ethical uncertainty, and psychological complexity, which destabilize the rigid binaries that have historically defined gender roles. Shiva, the protagonist, is not portrayed as an infallible divine figure but as a deeply human leader who grapples with moral dilemmas, self-doubt, and the burdens of responsibility. His struggles foreground vulnerability as an integral aspect of masculinity, thereby challenging the cultural expectation that men must embody unwavering strength and control. This reconfiguration suggests that the transformation of gender roles is not a unidirectional process confined to the empowerment of women; rather, it necessitates a simultaneous reimagining of masculinity in ways that allow for emotional openness, ethical reflexivity, and relational interdependence.

At the same time, the widespread appeal and accessibility of popular literature significantly enhance its potential as a vehicle for disseminating feminist ideas and reshaping cultural consciousness. Unlike academic texts, which are often restricted to specialized or elite readerships, popular fiction reaches a broad and diverse audience cutting across class, educational, and generational boundaries. This inclusivity enables it to function as a powerful medium through which complex theoretical concerns can be translated into engaging and relatable narratives. Authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, through works like *The Palace of Illusions*, embed critical reflections on gender, identity, and power within compelling storytelling frameworks, thereby creating accessible entry points for readers who may not otherwise engage with formal feminist discourse. This narrative strategy not only broadens the reach of feminist ideas but also fosters a more participatory form of cultural engagement, where readers are encouraged to question, reinterpret, and internalize alternative perspectives. In this sense, the democratization of knowledge facilitated by popular literature becomes one of its most significant feminist contributions, as it bridges the gap between theory and lived experience, enabling a wider rearticulation of gender norms and identities within the public sphere.



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Indian popular fiction, particularly in the form of mythological retellings, has emerged as a vital and dynamic site of feminist intervention, where the authority of canonical narratives is both questioned and reconfigured. By revisiting and rewriting foundational texts, these works challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal representations that have historically defined women as passive, subordinate, or symbolic figures. Instead, they reclaim female agency by foregrounding women's voices, interiority, and subjectivity, thereby transforming characters who were once marginal into central agents of meaning. Such reinterpretations resonate strongly with the theoretical insights of *The Second Sex*, which conceptualizes gender as a process of becoming shaped by social conditioning, and *Gender Trouble*, which exposes gender as a performative construct sustained through repetition. When applied to mythological narratives, these frameworks reveal how traditional depictions of femininity are neither natural nor inevitable but are instead culturally produced and ideologically maintained. Consequently, contemporary retellings disrupt these assumptions by offering alternative representations that expand the possibilities of gendered identity and power.

In this context, *The Palace of Illusions* stands as a compelling example of the transformative potential of such narratives. By reimagining the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, the novel not only restores voice and agency to a previously marginalized figure but also reorients the reader's engagement with the epic itself. Draupadi is no longer confined to the role of a symbolic catalyst for male action; instead, she emerges as a complex individual negotiating desire, duty, and selfhood within a restrictive social order. Through this nuanced portrayal, the text demonstrates how popular literature can move beyond mere reflection of social realities to actively participate in their reshaping. By making feminist concerns accessible to a broad readership, such narratives contribute to an ongoing cultural dialogue, challenging normative gender ideologies and opening up new ways of understanding identity, resistance, and empowerment.

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