The Influence of Ancient Indian Texts on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: *The broad area of Indian literature has long been centered around the great epics of the subcontinent, specifically* The Mahabharata *and* The Ramayana. *These timeless works continuously evolve, adopting new interpretations and forms to align with the changing times. Retellings have emerged as a literary genre where contemporary authors revisit these ancient texts, offering fresh perspectives that resonate with modern contexts. In recent years, Indian epics and mythology have captivated writers by providing strong, compelling voices to characters who were overlooked or silenced in the original narratives. Such reinterpretations are essential for uncovering the countless viewpoints buried within the depths of these ancient works. This paper examines two modern retellings of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: "The Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments". Divakaruni offers a powerful portrayal of the heroines from these epics, reimagining them with strength and resilience. Divakaruni has changed her way of thinking from traditional portrayal of simple and selfless women into modern female characters who is searching for their identity in the patriarchal world. Additionally, she brings to light the courage and depth of even the minor female characters, presenting them in ways that have not been explored before. Divakaruni shifts from the traditional depiction of simple, selfless women to modern female characters who actively seek their own identity within a patriarchal society. The author integrates mythological themes with contemporary problems like identity, gender, and personal agency allows these ageless stories to speak to today's readers. In this regard, Divakaruni breathes new life into old stories besides translocating them to answer the challenges of the contemporary world.*

Key Words: *Ancient Indian Epics, Feminist Retellings, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, Indian Knowledge System, Mythological Revision.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo-American writer. She is prominently known for her works on Indian immigrants living in America. She in her writings often blends Indian mythology, history, and contemporary themes. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned author whose works delve into themes of mythology, identity, and the immigrant experience. Her writings celebrate the richness of Indian culture while reinterpreting myths to highlight their contemporary relevance. With meticulous attention to detail and a captivating narrative style, Divakaruni skillfully intertwines ancient stories with modern experiences, offering profound reflections on human relationships and cultural conflicts. Her writing style frequently delves deep into the intricate relationship between mythology and modern life, reinterpreting ancient tales in a contemporary context that connect with readers across diverse cultural backgrounds. This article examines how ancient Indian texts influence Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings. The Ramayana and The Mahabharta - these two great mythologies serve as a foundational element in her works, functioning both as a narrative framework and as a lens through which their modern retellings are explored. This paper investigates how Divakaruni's reinterpretations of these epics reflect the philosophical underpinnings of the Indian Knowledge System. This discussion highlights her ability to recast the epics in a way that aligns with contemporary issues, such as gender equality and personal agency. This analysis also explores how her narratives preserve and reinterpret ancient wisdom, ensuring its relevance in a rapidly changing world.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To analyze the influence of ancient Indian epics like The Mahabharata and The Ramayana on the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.
- To study how these epics have evolved over time through retellings, focusing on their reinterpretation in modern literature.
- To explore how Divakaruni integrates timeless mythological themes with contemporary issues such as identity, gender inequality, and personal agency.
- To investigate how Divakaruni gives prominence to minor female characters in her narratives, offering them depth and a voice often absent in traditional portrayals.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative method of research. A close textual analysis has been done to explore the influence of Indian epics on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, "The Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments". The methodology emphasizes textual analysis to uncover the feminist perspective and the integration of contemporary issues within the retellings. The study employs feminist literary criticism to examine how Divakaruni reimagines female characters, focusing on their empowerment, agency, and resistance to patriarchal norms.

4. ANALYSIS:

Indian epics and mythologies are continually being reimagined and reinterpreted by contemporary writers, offering fresh dimensions to these timeless narratives. The captivating and intricate tales of epics such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana have become foundational texts for modern retellings, which provide distinctive voices relevant to contemporary society. These reinterpretations have significantly expanded the global readership of Indian cultural narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of the social and physical landscapes of the Indian subcontinent. Prominent figures in the realm of mythological retellings include Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattanaik, Shashi Tharoor, Anand Neelakandan, and Ashwin Sanghi. These authors have introduced innovative perspectives, uncovering hidden and marginalized voices within ancient epics and offering insights into overlooked aspects of these stories. Distinct from her contemporaries, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has brought a transformative approach to mythological retellings through her acclaimed novels, "The Palace of Illusions" and "The Forest of Enchantments". In these works, Divakaruni reimagines The Mahabharata and the Ramayana by centering the narratives around the experiences of women. By presenting the heroines as the central figures, she subverts traditional stereotypes and amplifies the voices of female characters often deemed peripheral in the original epics. Her retellings not only empower the female protagonists but also give prominence to the narratives of women traditionally sidelined, thereby offering a compelling and nuanced reinterpretation of these iconic stories.

The Indian Knowledge System is a holistic framework encompassing diverse disciplines such as philosophy, literature, science, and spirituality. Central to this system are the epics and scriptures, which serve as repositories of ethical and moral guidance. The Mahabharata and tThe Ramayana are not merely historical or mythological accounts; they are profound treatises on dharma (duty), artha (purpose), kama (desire), and moksha (liberation). In the Indian Knowledge System, these texts are dynamic sources of wisdom, open to reinterpretation across generations. Divakaruni's engagement with these epics exemplifies this tradition of reinterpretation. Her works embody the principles of the Indian Knowledge System by emphasizing themes such as ethical dilemmas, the pursuit of self-knowledge, and the role of women in shaping societal values. Over the years, numerous retellings of the great Indian epics, such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, have emerged. Most of these narratives, however, have traditionally centered around the male heroes of the stories, leaving the experiences of female characters largely unexamined and their voices unheard. Feminist reinterpretations seek to address this imbalance by integrating women's perspectives into literature and acknowledging the value of their experiences. Such feminist approaches deconstruct traditional narratives, established stereotypes, and open pathways to fresh, compelling interpretations of these challenge timeless epics.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's acclaimed novels, "The Palace of Illusions" (2008) and "The Forest of Enchantments" (2019), reinterpret India's two great epics, The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, through the eyes of their central female characters, Draupadi and Sita. Rather than altering the core narratives, Divakaruni reimagines these iconic women, endowing them with strong, self-assured voices that narrate deeply personal journeys against the backdrop of male-dominated conflicts, such as the Kurukshetra War and Rama's quest. Her portrayal captures the intense emotions, desires, and sacrifices of these women, shedding light on themes of motherhood, love, loss, exile, and the injustices they endure in a patriarchal framework. The novels critique how tradition and culture often compel women to conform without question. Divakaruni's reinterpretations humanize these epic heroines, offering modern, relatable

perspectives while preserving the richness and depth of the original tales. Her approach challenges stereotypes and amplifies the voices of women who have historically been sidelined, making the epics resonate with contemporary audiences. The novel "The Palace of Illusions" offers a deeply poignant retelling of The Mahabharata from the perspective of its heroine, Draupadi, also known as Panchaali. Historically misunderstood and often portrayed negatively, Draupadi emerges in this narrative as a fiery, multifaceted individual whose deeds and sacrifices are given the depth and nuance they deserve. Divakaruni begins her exploration of Panchaali's story with her extraordinary birth, framing her as a princess shaped by both fire and destiny. By narrating the events of the epic entirely through Draupadi's eyes, the novel transforms the traditional male-dominated narrative into an introspective account of a woman navigating a patriarchal world. The Palace of Illusions, redefines the long-established identity of Draupadi by amplifying her voice and reconsidering her existence within the narrative of the epic. From the moment of her birth, Draupadi's destiny was influenced by patriarchal norms, exemplified by her being named after her father, Draupad. This naming convention effectively stripped her of an independent identity, as her very name tied her existence to her father. In this way, her name symbolized the constraints imposed on her within a male-dominated society, foreshadowing the challenges she would face throughout her life. Deep within, Draupadi never fully embraced her given name, as she recognized her ability to craft her own identity independent of her father's legacy. She rejected the notion of relying on her father's name to define her worth and dignity. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi in "The Palace of Illusions" presents a character who is neither silent nor submissive. She challenges prevailing societal norms, refusing to blindly accept traditional beliefs or allow patriarchal dominance to suppress her inner resolve. Despite enduring numerous trials and humiliations throughout her life, Draupadi transforms these hardships into opportunities to assert her resilience and prove her unyielding spirit. This tenacity ultimately positions her as a woman of extraordinary strength who influences the course of history. In "The Palace of Illusions", Divakaruni masterfully delves deep into Draupadi's inner thoughts and emotions, shedding light on the motivations behind her decisions and actions. As a child, Draupadi experienced the harsh realities of gender discrimination, becoming both a witness to and a victim of societal biases. Through her Dhai Ma, she learned the painful truth that her birth was uncelebrated—her father, King Draupad, had desired only a son to fulfill his quest for vengeance, rendering a daughter insignificant in his eyes. Throughout her childhood, Draupadi frequently observed her father's blatant favoritism toward her brother, Dhrishtadyumna. These early encounters with discrimination deeply impacted Draupadi, eroding her trust in her father and awakening her awareness of the entrenched gender inequalities of her time. This betrayal fueled her defiant stance against such injustices. Her strong sense of self-respect prevented her from ever accepting her father's palace as her true home, as she could not forget his initial rejection of her. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi reveals her as a feminist figure in many ways. Her feminist traits are woven throughout the narrative, as her journey unfolds from a fiery and headstrong princess to the queen of a magnificent palace and the mother of five sons. Draupadi's determination to assert her identity is evident from the very beginning when her father names her Draupadi, a title that merely denotes her as the princess of the Drupad kingdom. Rejecting this imposed identity, she willingly embraces the name 'Panchaali,' bestowed upon her by sage Vyasa, which carries deeper meaning by signifying her as the princess of the prosperous land of Panchaal. This choice reflects her desire for a name that acknowledges her individuality and worth beyond familial associations.

In The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni not only amplifies Draupadi's silenced voice but also redefines her identity. Through the portrayal of Draupadi, Divakaruni skillfully integrates contemporary issues faced by women in countries like India. Despite Draupadi's origins in an ancient era and a bygone society, the challenges women encounter remains strikingly similar even today. Women across various parts of India continue to struggle for access to education and fight for their fundamental rights. Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions" can also be interpreted as a critique of the deeply entrenched gender biases in our society, emphasizing the urgent need for transformative change. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest OF Enchantments" is about the retelling of our ancient prestigious epic The Ramayana from Sita's perspective. In the beginning of the novel, Sita wants to write her own story- Sitayana so that the raw form of emotions, struggles, pain, dejection and hopelessness that she felt would be told from her point of view. And that would be the truest portrayal of her life. The author undertook comprehensive research by analyzing four distinct versions of the Ramayana: The Valmiki Ramayana, Adbhuta Ramayana, Kamba Ramayana, and Bengali Krittibasi Ramayana. Divakaruni portrays Sita as a distinctly contemporary woman in "The Forest of Enchantments". While Sita is traditionally depicted in Indian popular culture as meek, docile, tender, long-suffering, and self-sacrificing—enduring misfortunes with quiet resilience, Divakaruni offers a fresh perspective. She reimagines Sita's character through a modern lens, utilizing a narratorial voice that recasts her story in a way that aligns with present-day sensibilities. The novel emphasizes Sita's journey of self-discovery and her quest for self-identity, themes that are as vital and natural in contemporary Indian fiction as in ancient time. Sita possesses knowledge across various subjects and is skilled in martial arts, a discipline her mother, Queen Sunaina, deemed essential for every girl to learn. Sita stands in stark contrast to her sister Urmila, who prefers playing with toys and has a fondness for jewelry. Instead, Sita is deeply

observant of her father's governance and her mother's role as his advisor. Through observing her parents, she learned how to navigate challenging situations effectively. Sita also cherished her connection with nature, finding joy in being amidst plants. When she touched them, she could sense their healing properties and even perceive their subtle sounds, reflecting her profound bond with the natural world. Sita symbolizes cosmic energy and the sustenance that fosters creativity and life in the world. According to Hindu mythology, she represents the essence of all creation. She lives life on her own terms, understanding that self-respect and dignity are paramount for a woman. Her glory is entirely her own achievement, as she refused to succumb to patriarchal dominance. Sita is a figure who can be analyzed through the lens of feminism, showcasing how a woman can rise victorious despite enduring a life filled with tragedy. Even if her freedom demanded the ultimate sacrifice, she prioritized her peace of mind, choosing to return to the embrace of Mother Earth. The novel vividly captures Sita's thoughts, mindset, and deepest emotions, resonating with readers and touching their hearts because her story remains relatable even today. This timeless relevance is one of the reasons the Ramayana is considered a classic in world literature, translated into more than 300 languages. Sita's name, meaning "Furrow," reflects her origin and the place where her father found her. According to Hindu mythology, Rama and Sita are eternally bonded by a thread of love as incarnations of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi. However, even as a mortal woman, Sita adhered to her principles, sacrificing everything, including her life, to uphold them. Her story serves as a powerful example for Indian women to raise their voices against injustice while maintaining their dignity. She returned to the same earth from which she was born, reflecting her deep love for Mother Earth. Her beauty mirrored the splendor of nature, encompassing forests, lakes, animals, and birds. From the outset, Sita's character is portrayed as having a profound connection with nature. Her spirit is in complete harmony with the natural world, and her unwavering self-belief and confidence serve as her weapons against adversity. She is forgiving, generous, and deeply grateful for all she has experienced in life, even the pain. Despite the challenges she faced, Sita demonstrated an indomitable attitude of resilience and determination, embodying a "never give up" spirit. Sita embodies feminine spontaneity, and her life reflects the challenges that women continue to face even today. As the story unfolds, the "Agni Pariksha" a trial by fire designed to prove Sita's purity—poses the ultimate challenge to her existence. However, this iconic tale is reinterpreted through a lens that shifts focus from victimhood to empowerment. Sita is portrayed not as a passive sufferer but as a figure of remarkable strength, unyielding self-determination, and defiant femininity. This retelling reframes Valmiki's Sita, presenting her as a symbol of boldness and agency, thereby redefining her legacy in a way that resonates with contemporary feminist ideals. For Sita, forests were a source of life, nurturing her and imparting valuable lessons. This perspective contrasts sharply with that of men, who often view forests as wild and untamed. The novel stands as a feminist portrayal of Sita's character, highlighting her struggles, trials, and the significant transformations in her life that solidify her worth as a goddess. When confronted with the same situation twice—particularly regarding the questioning of her chastity—Sita knew exactly how to respond. She raised Luv and Kush with great care, ensuring they grew into capable warriors ready to follow in their father's footsteps. Having fulfilled her responsibilities and purpose, Sita ultimately chose herself. Despite the hardships and trials, she endured, she chose to forgive her husband, Rama, in the end.

5. FINDINGS:

By addressing themes of identity, gender dynamics, and personal empowerment, Divakaruni's works resonate deeply with contemporary readers, especially women navigating similar struggles in patriarchal settings. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi and Sita as strong, complex individuals who defy traditional stereotypes of self-sacrificing and submissive women, highlighting their courage, self-respect, and personal agency. Divakaruni skillfully bridges the gap between mythology and modernity, using ancient texts to comment on contemporary social challenges, demonstrating the timeless relevance of these epics. Through her retellings, Divakaruni preserves the cultural essence of Indian epics while adapting their themes and characters to address modern concerns, ensuring their vitality in the current literary landscape. The reinterpretation of Draupadi and Sita empowers readers by showcasing how historical and mythical narratives can inspire strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

6. CONCLUSION:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's engagement with ancient Indian texts demonstrates her ability to bridge the gap between classical traditions and contemporary sensibilities. By reimagining she breathes new life into the epics of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, offering nuanced perspectives on gender, identity, and morality. Her works resonate with the Indian Knowledge System, reflecting its emphasis on ethics, self-discovery, and cultural values while challenging entrenched societal norms. Her works underscore the timeless relevance of ancient Indian texts, highlighting their potential to inspire and inform across generations. In conclusion, both Sita and Draupadi are embodiments of courage and resilience. Their journeys through immense struggles and fleeting moments of joy shaped them into strong

and independent individuals, enabling them to break free from the constraints of domestic life. Through their endurance and transformative actions, they emerged as iconic figures who reshaped the course of history.

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