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The Exploration of Female Agency and Resistance Against Patriarchal Oppression Within Indian Society

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ABSTRACT: "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy. Divakaruni's novel offers a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata, focusing on Draupadi's journey to assert agency within a patriarchal society. Meanwhile, Roy's "The God of Small Things" intricately examines the lives of twins Rahel and Estha within the context of caste, class, and gender oppression in Kerala. Both authors skillfully critique societal norms and power structures, highlighting the resilience of women against systemic oppression. Through their narratives, they challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for gender equality. This comparative analysis sheds light on the diverse ways in which Indian literature engages with feminist discourse, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in fostering empathy and advocating for social change.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Indian Literature, Representation of Women, Feminist themes.

I. INTRODUCTION

With a focus on *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, this study explores the complex examination of feminism in Indian literature. The study tries to disentangle the complexity within these books, with a particular focus on the representation of women and feminist issues. It emphasises the use of mythology as a prism through which to analyse these novels' contributions to contemporary feminist discourse within the rich cultural setting of India. By means of a thorough analysis, this study aims to provide significant insights into the representation of women and the interaction of feminist concepts in these important literary pieces. Our goal as we read through these books is to identify the socio-cultural nuances that influence how women are portrayed and to reveal the feminism weaved throughout the story. Given how literature has the power to change society perspectives and contribute to continuing discussions about gender roles and expectations, this research is especially relevant at this time. Through the use of a comparative approach and an exploration of the mythologies that have been accepted, our goal is to shed light on the ways in which these modern literary works' feminist discourse is shaped by old cultural narratives. These books provide a unique prism through which we may examine the changing terrain of feminist thinking within the Indian literary setting, thanks to their delicate dance between tradition and modernity. Chapters following will be revealed as we go along, all of which will contribute to a comprehensive comprehension of the feminist stories found in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The God of Small Things*. Our goal is to make a significant contribution to the larger conversation on feminism in Indian literature by bringing new perspectives to the dynamic relationship between cultural heritage, storytelling, and the changing representation of women in literature. The examination of female topics has been a dynamic and developing discourse across the rich fabric of Indian literature. The goal of this study is to examine and comprehend the complex feminism that is present in two important books written by renowned authors, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Arundhati Roy, respectively: *The God of Small Things* and *The Palace of Illusions*. Each of these novels offers a distinctive viewpoint on the portrayal of women and the integration of feminist themes, making them significant voices within the larger story of Indian literature. This approach is important because it shows how literature has a significant influence on how society views certain topics, especially those related to gender norms and expectations. We hope to clarify the nuances of women's representation and the ways feminist ideas are intertwined throughout these novels' storylines by analysing their narratives. Additionally, by shedding light on the mythologies that have been chosen for these works, this research hopes to provide light on the ways in which old cultural narratives influence discussions about feminism today. It is imperative that we recognise the historical and cultural background that provides the backdrop for these literary works as we begin this investigation. India is a country rich in cultural diversity, and its writers' narratives are shaped and influenced by this legacy. Knowing this background is essential to appreciating the subtle feminist sentiments in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The God of Small Things*. Ten chapters that have been thoughtfully written to focus on different



facets of the selected literary masterpieces make up this study. The context in terms of history and culture, a close reading of each book, and a comparative analysis will all be covered in the upcoming chapters. In summary, by illuminating how women are portrayed and feminist issues are expressed in the framework of these two significant novels, this study aims to advance knowledge of feminism in Indian literature. In exploring *The Palace of Illusions* and *The God of Small Things*, we hope to shed light on the intricate ways that feminist discourse and gender portrayal work within the ever-evolving field of Indian literature.

The Palace of Illusions: Unveiling Feminist Narratives

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *"The Palace of Illusions"* is an engrossing account of the Mahabharata, told from Draupadi's point of view. The intricate relationships between identity, agency, and power in a patriarchal society are examined in this feminist reinterpretation. The Mahabharata's main character, Draupadi, is typically viewed as a victim of her environment. Divakaruni's story, on the other hand, gives Draupadi a voice and agency. She is portrayed in the book as a strong-willed, tough woman who struggles with societal expectations, defies gender stereotypes, and overcomes obstacles placed in her path. Divakaruni's story, on the other hand, gives Draupadi a voice and agency. She is portrayed in the book as a strong-willed, tough woman who struggles with societal expectations, defies gender stereotypes, and overcomes obstacles placed in her path.

Examining Draupadi's goals and wants is one of the book's major feminist topics. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as a woman with goals and aspirations in a culture where women's duties are frequently limited to traditional expectations. Her desire for equality, love, and respect contradicts the stereotype of her as a helpless victim. Draupadi's ties, especially those with the five Pandava brothers, are clarified by the *Palace of Illusions*. By navigating the complications of polyandry, Divakaruni offers a feminist perspective on Draupadi's decisions and the expectations placed upon her by society. The story pushes back against traditional ideas of marriage and love, asking readers to reevaluate these relationships from a feminist standpoint. In addition, the story criticizes the epic's depiction of women and the idea of honor. Draupadi's public humiliation in the court, where she is stripped naked, turns into a potent representation of tyranny by patriarchy. By addressing this issue head-on, Divakaruni highlights Draupadi's fortitude and bravery in the face of such humiliation. The author deftly undermines the idea that a woman's modesty equates to honor, challenging readers to consider social standards that perpetuate such atrocities. The book also looks at how women are affected by war, highlighting the sometimes disregarded effects of hostilities. The difficulties Draupadi faced during the Kurukshetra War, her defeats, and the fallout from them demonstrate the harm that women suffer when there is warfare. Divakaruni challenges readers to consider the larger effects of violence on marginalized groups by posing significant concerns regarding the toll that war takes on women's life. Throughout the novel, Draupadi navigates the complexities of her relationships with her husbands, asserting her voice and agency even in the face of adversity. Draupadi's relationship with her husbands is portrayed as complex and nuanced, defying traditional notions of marriage and monogamy. While she shares a deep and profound connection with each of her husbands, her relationships with them are not without conflict and tension. Draupadi grapples with her own desires and passions, as well as the expectations placed on her as a woman and a queen. Divakaruni does not shy away from depicting the complexities of female sexuality and desire, presenting Draupadi as a fully realized woman with her own agency and autonomy. In addition to exploring Draupadi's individual agency, *"The Palace of Illusions"* also delves into the dynamics of sisterhood and female solidarity. Despite the rivalry and conflict between Draupadi and her sister-in-law, Gandhari, there is an underlying bond of empathy and understanding between them. Both women are trapped in marriages to powerful men and must navigate the complexities of palace politics and familial expectations. Through their interactions, Divakaruni highlights the importance of women supporting and uplifting each other in a world that often seeks to pit them against one another. Moreover, the novel examines the intersections of power, desire, and politics in ancient Indian society. Draupadi is not just a passive bystander in the events of the Mahabharata but an active participant who shapes the course of history through her actions and choices. She is a skilled diplomat, strategist, and leader who commands respect and admiration from both allies and adversaries alike. Draupadi's intelligence, courage, and resilience serve as a powerful testament to the strength and capabilities of women in a patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Divakaruni challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, offering a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata that centers the experiences and perspectives of its female characters. By giving voice to Draupadi and other women of the epic, Divakaruni invites readers to reconsider their understanding of this ancient tale and to recognize the importance of female narratives in shaping our understanding of history and mythology. In conclusion, *"The Palace of Illusions"* is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that unveils feminist narratives within the framework of the Mahabharata. Through Draupadi's eyes, readers are invited to explore themes of agency, autonomy, sisterhood, and power in ancient Indian society. Divakaruni's reimagining of this ancient epic offers a fresh and insightful perspective on the experiences of women in a male-dominated world, challenging readers to reconsider their preconceived notions and to recognize



the importance of female voices in shaping our understanding of the past. To sum up, "The Palace of Illusions" is a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata that reveals the facets of Draupadi's persona and her adventure.

By deftly exposing the feminist tales concealed throughout the epic, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges conventional wisdom and encourages readers to consider the intricate relationships between gender, power, and agency. The book challenges readers to reevaluate relationships, challenge social standards, and consider how resilient women can be when faced with hardship from the perspective of Draupadi.

The God of Small Things: Feminist Perspectives

With deep feminist insights, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" deftly crafts a tapestry of caste, gender, and social conventions in post-colonial India. The book explores the interconnections of gender, caste, and societal expectations as it explores the complexity of women's lives and challenges patriarchal norms. The protagonist of the book is a woman named Ammu who defies the strict societal mores of her day. Ammu's journey, in which she rejects traditional norms in search of love and independence, epitomizes feminist resistance. Her tragic relationship with the lower-caste man Velutha turns into a moving examination of passions that are taboo in a caste-restricted culture. The story explores how gender overlaps with the repressive caste system in addition to criticizing it. Ammu's breaches expose the connections between these oppressive structures by challenging gender and caste standards. Readers are prompted by the book to consider the ways in which casteism and patriarchy reinforce one another, limiting the agency of women—especially those who defy social norms. Roy emphasizes how events affect people's lives by using the non-linear storytelling style. The framework itself turns into a critique of the nonlinearity of women's resistance to social norms. It is a reflection of women's broken and divided lives in a society that refuses to give them a straight road to empowerment and progress. The intricacies of mother-daughter relationships are revealed as the work delves into the issue of parenting. The difficulties that women encounter in a patriarchal culture are highlighted by Ammu's experiences as a single mother, her battles with social expectations, and the fallout from her disobedience. Mammachi, the mother of Rahel and Estha, is shown in a way that adds still another level to the examination of parenthood as she struggles with both social expectations and her own unmet needs. Kerala, India, is a strongly culturally embedded place for the God of Small Things. The story is enhanced by the use of Malayalam language and the depiction of regional traditions, providing a sophisticated comprehension of the intersectionality of gender and culture. The book emphasizes how cultural norms can complicate women's experiences by both empowering and limiting them. Using figures like Baby Kochamma, Roy also criticizes the institutionalization of patriarchy in society. Baby Kochamma is a symbol of the cooperation of individuals in maintaining patriarchal structures because of her conformity to social norms, her manipulation of power dynamics, and her part in the continuation of gender-based oppression. The book challenges readers to consider how women individually contribute to the upholding of patriarchal standards and restricting the agency of other women. To accept and internalize their own subjugation. Additionally, "The God of Small Things" throughout the novel, Ammu struggles to assert her autonomy and find fulfillment in a world that seeks to silence and suppress her voice. Roy also explores the impact of caste and class on the lives of women in India. Ammu's relationship with Velutha, a lower-caste man, is condemned by society due to the rigid hierarchies that govern social interactions. Their love is seen as transgressive and threatening to the established order, leading to tragic consequences for both of them.

Through their story, Roy highlights the intersecting forms of oppression faced by women who dare to challenge societal norms and expectations. The novel also examines the ways in which women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal values and norms. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, is a complex character who both suffers from and perpetuates the cycle of abuse and oppression within her family. Despite experiencing violence at the hands of her husband, she remains complicit in maintaining the status quo, unable or unwilling to break free from the constraints of patriarchy. Roy's portrayal of Mammachi serves as a powerful critique of the ways in which women are socialized. "The God of Small Things" explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and power. Roy's depiction of Sophie Mol, an English girl visiting India with her family, highlights the ways in which Western notions of femininity and beauty are imposed upon women in colonized societies. Sophie is objectified and exoticized by the Indian men around her, highlighting the ways in which women's bodies become sites of contestation and control in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Furthermore, Roy examines the ways in which women's agency is constrained by familial and societal expectations. Rahel, despite her intelligence and creativity, struggles to find her place in the world and assert her independence. She is haunted by the traumas of her past and the weight of her family's expectations, leading her to feel trapped and suffocated by the constraints placed upon her. Roy's portrayal of Rahel's inner turmoil reflects the experiences of many women who grapple with the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity in a rapidly changing world. In conclusion, "The God of Small Things" offers a nuanced and complex exploration of gender, power, and identity in post-colonial India. Through the experiences of her characters, particularly the female protagonists, Arundhati Roy sheds light on the ways in which patriarchy, caste, and colonialism intersect to shape women's lives and experiences. Roy's novel challenges readers to



confront the injustices and inequalities that persist in Indian society and to recognize the importance of feminist perspectives in understanding and addressing these issues. "The God of Small Things" is a narrative that addresses larger social themes in addition to personal struggles. The untimely demise of Velutha, the guy from a lower caste who fell in love with Ammu, highlights the pervasive bigotry and brutality that permeate society. His passing becomes a symbol of the more significant societal injustices that minority people must contend with as well as the fallout from defying social standards.

In conclusion, "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy provides a diverse range of feminist viewpoints set against the setting of post-colonial India. The story explores the cultural subtleties that influence women's lives, questions conventional maternity narratives, and analyzes the intersections of caste and gender through characters like Ammu. Roy's masterful storytelling invites readers to confront the complexities of patriarchal structures and reflect on the ways in which women navigate and resist societal expectations in a world of small things.

II. FEMINIST THEMES ACROSS THE NOVELS

Feminist literature seeks to explore and challenge the patriarchal structures that govern society, giving voice to marginalized perspectives and advocating for gender equality. "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy are two novels that engage with feminist themes, albeit in different historical and cultural contexts. This essay will examine how these novels navigate issues of gender, power, and agency, and how they offer nuanced portrayals of female characters within patriarchal societies.

III. GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Both novels confront the gendered expectations and constraints imposed on women by patriarchal societies, albeit in different ways. In "The Palace of Illusions," Divakaruni reimagines the ancient Indian epic of the Mahabharata through the perspective of Draupadi, a fiercely independent woman who challenges traditional gender roles and defies societal norms. Draupadi's agency and resilience serve as a powerful commentary on the constraints placed on women in both ancient and contemporary India.

Similarly, "The God of Small Things" explores the impact of patriarchy on the lives of its female characters, particularly through the lens of the Ipe family in Kerala. Ammu, the protagonist's mother, is trapped in a loveless marriage and struggles to assert her independence within the rigid confines of a conservative society. Her desire for autonomy and self-fulfillment is continually thwarted by patriarchal norms and expectations.

IV. INTERSECTIONALITY AND CASTE

Both novels also delve into the intersectionality of gender with other forms of oppression, such as caste and class. In "The Palace of Illusions," Draupadi's identity as a woman from a marginalized caste adds layers of complexity to her experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Despite her royal status as a princess, Draupadi is constantly reminded of her lowly birth and is subjected to humiliation and abuse by men of higher caste. Similarly, "The God of Small Things" portrays the intersecting oppressions faced by its female characters, particularly through the lens of Ammu and Velutha, an Untouchable man with whom she falls in love. Their forbidden romance defies the rigid caste hierarchy of Kerala society, but ultimately leads to tragedy as they are unable to escape the consequences of their actions in a society governed by patriarchal and casteist norms.

V. REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND BODILY AUTONOMY

Reproductive rights and bodily autonomy emerge as significant feminist themes in both novels, highlighting the ways in which women's bodies are often commodified and controlled by patriarchal systems. In "The Palace of Illusions," Draupadi's fertility becomes a source of power and vulnerability, as she is manipulated and exploited by men who seek to control her reproductive capacity for their own ends.

Similarly, "The God of Small Things" explores the consequences of societal expectations surrounding women's sexuality and reproduction. Ammu's decision to pursue a relationship outside of marriage leads to ostracism and condemnation from her family and community, highlighting the double standards and hypocrisy that govern women's sexual agency in patriarchal societies.



VI. CONCLUSION

In the landscape of Indian literature, feminism serves as a potent lens through which authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Arundhati Roy explore the multifaceted experiences of women. Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions" reinterprets the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, offering a feminist reclamation of a canonical epic. Through Draupadi's eyes, the novel delves into themes of agency, identity, and resilience, challenging traditional portrayals of women in Indian mythology. Similarly, Roy's "The God of Small Things" intricately examines the intersection of gender and caste in Kerala society, depicting the struggles of female characters like Ammu against oppressive societal norms. Both novels confront issues of patriarchy, discrimination, and societal expectations, presenting a nuanced portrayal of the female experience in India. Through their works, Divakaruni and Roy contribute to the ongoing discourse on feminism in Indian literature, offering narratives that amplify women's voices and shed light on their struggles for autonomy and equality. By weaving together richly textured stories populated with complex female characters, these authors invite readers to engage critically with issues of gender and power dynamics in Indian society. In conclusion, "The Palace of Illusions" and "The God of Small Things" stand as powerful testaments to the enduring relevance of feminist themes in Indian literature, inspiring readers to reconsider conventional narratives and envision a more inclusive and equitable future.

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