

Block

**7****LITERATURE AND CULTURE: EXCHANGES AND  
NEGOTIATIONS-II**

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## **BLOCK INTRODUCTION**

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### **Literature and Culture: Exchanges and Negotiations II**

The revising, rewriting and reframing of texts that have long been considered as classics are often seen as presenting a counterpoint to the prevailing male voice. The telling of a story from another point of view can be seen as an attempt to explore and perhaps bridge, the spaces and silences in a text in order to give voice to the hitherto ignored. Writing has always been regarded as a strong form of control – culturally and morally – so the rewriting and reframing of texts that featured male superiority at their core can be viewed as an act of liberation for those who were depicted as subordinate or inferior. This Block will look at shifting perspectives – how a familiar story can be retold from a different perspective either through change of narrator (or even by adapting it into a film) by taking up the familiar story of the *Mahabharata* as narrated by the female protagonist, Draupadi.



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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# UNIT 1 SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Perspectives
- 1.3 Textual Productions
- 1.4 Audio-Visual Narratives
- 1.5 Inter-cultural Perspectives
- 1.6 Let us Sum Up
- 1.7 Unit End Questions
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The scope and study of comparative literature is now no longer limited to two texts only. While reading texts the student must be aware of the social and political scenario, for a writer does not write in isolation: his/her work is a product of the time. This unit on shifting perspectives will enable us to understand that a literary work is not limited to any one discipline. Rather, the work can be analysed and read from an interdisciplinary aspect. The academic field of the study of comparative literature thus includes race, ethnicity, location, nationality and disability.

By the end of this unit you would have an idea of how shifts in perspective not only influence or affect the presentation of a situation or story but also the reading and interpretation of a work.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Why do we read or pursue a Course in Comparative literature? After reading the previous blocks, you would have your own answers to this question. The reason is obvious: comparative literature enables us to understand the cultures, customs and conventions of different regions, nations, groups etc. Comparative literature has evolved over the years and various components have shaped our lives. In the past, literary studies in the field of comparative literature would analyse texts from two languages and focus on the literary content only. Now, the perspective has changed; hence this unit is devoted to the study of shifting perspectives of comparative literature.

In the earlier units you have read about concepts and theories that talked about what comparative literature is. This must have given you an idea about the multi-disciplinary dimensions of comparative literature.

### Activity 1

Before we proceed, think of two books that you have read representing two different cultures: try to compare and contrast them.

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## 1.2 PERSPECTIVES

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The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009 edition) defines the word “perspectives” as “a way of thinking about something... a sensible way of judging and comparing situations so that you do not imagine that some thing is more serious than it really is ... from someone’s perspective, a view, especially one in which you can see a long way into the distance ... (p.1297).

These meanings will help you to understand how perspectives change from time to time, from situation to situation, from locale to locale and from age to age. Please remember that in this unit we are talking about literary texts. How do writers’ perspectives change when they write about the same issue? We are not going to discuss the perspective of the photographer or the painter or the sculptor for that matter. The perspective presented by visual artists is outside the purview of this unit.

### Activity 2

Try to recall what you thought of your school when you went to study there and what you think of your school now when you are pursuing a postgraduate course. Is there a change? Why do you think this is so?

As you read the works of different writers, you will notice that men and women may have different perspectives. Perspectives also change when you read works written by expatriates, diasporic writers and immigrant settlers. The question then arises; why do perspectives change? It is because our life is an interdisciplinary minefield which includes in its fold literature, language, history, political science, sociology, law, anthropology, cinema and media studies, human development and medicine. Comparative literature incorporates methods and approaches from a wide range of disciplines. A student of comparative literature would also examine the role of society, tradition and culture in shaping mind-sets. It is important to remember that different readers will have different perspectives when they read the same book: hence interpretation differs from reader to reader.

In this section you have learnt about the meaning of perspective and how perspectives change.

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## 1.3 TEXTUAL PRODUCTIONS

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In this section we are going to discuss how texts (we do not mean text books alone) are written and how the writer and the reader have different perspectives. Ideas germinate in the minds of writers and they use words to give shape to their ideas. When you read a literary work, your understanding of the text depends on your linguistic ability to comprehend the text. Your appreciation of a text (novel, short stories, poems, essays and other non-literary works) also depends on your awareness of the cultural system that the text presents and the social scenario that it portrays.

Comparative literature is a study in trans-subjectivity where male and female writers’ revisions of literature texts and history have presented different points of view. Due to colonialism, Eurocentric forces dominated most parts of the world. Their thoughts and ideas were imposed on the masses. Moreover, societies in most parts of the world are patriarchal and patriarchal norms and ideas control the mind-sets of the people. Even today it is difficult to uproot patriarchal ideas from the minds of the Indian people.

In India, as in other parts of the world, a certain section of people lived on the fringes of society. These groups have now come forward to express themselves by writing about their experiences.

### Activity 3

Try and read the work of Bama which is titled *Sangati*. Mahasweta Devi's story *Mother of 1084* and Lakshman Gaekwad's tale *Uchchala* are also worth reading in this context as they present the marginalized perspective.

When you read works by or about Dalits, Adivasis, or tribals, you will realize that the periphery has moved to the centre. The centre (which till now was occupied by the privileged class) is forced to give space to these new forces.

If you look at historical texts, you will notice that in the past, the victor wrote the history of the land he had conquered. But with the demise of colonialism, writers and critics (especially post colonial), like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Meenakshi Mukherjee etc. began to propound their own theories and ideas. These thinkers have questioned the calm acceptance of Eurocentric norms. Refer to the ways postcolonial voices respond to the literary canon of the colonial centre. (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989).

Myths, fairy tales, oral narratives (which are now being published) travelogues, life histories are all various types of narratives and you must be familiar with them. Travelogues or travel narratives are now an extremely contemporary form of narrative. These narratives help the reader to understand a particular nation in its various aspects. And Travelogues which deal with pilgrimage centres tell us about that religious site in great detail. Sometimes these writings inform the reader about the miracles that have occurred in these shrines. Travel narratives provide information about places, people, their cultures and the subtle distinctions between various communities. In India travel writing probably began with Huein Tsang who came to India during the reign of the Maurya kings. His account of those times provides us with information about the glorious rule of the Maurya Emperors.

It is interesting to note that Indian Epics like *The Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been re-written. We have not only Valmiki's, we also have Tulsidas's and Kamban's versions of the *Ramayana*. Very recently feminist writers have re-written the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective-hence *Sita's Ramayana*. These writings enable us to understand the shift in perspective: how Sita would have expressed herself if she were to present her own view point.

A Diasporic writer, Chitra Banerji Divakuruni has written a novel titled *The Palace of Illusions*. In this novel we get to read about Draupadi's perspective: how did she view Kunti and Kunti's sons (Draupadi's five husbands)? What were her hopes and fears? This is discussed in detail in Unit 3 of this Block.

Revisions of literary texts from the point of view of the voiceless (usually a woman) may not necessarily be by women. But all such revisions and retellings can be said to feature one or all of the following:

The text so revised and rewritten is inevitably oppositional; it questions and regenerates the established text; it fleshes out, extends and gives an added dimension to the female character(s) who have been portrayed as inferior or have been relegated to a position of neglect; it challenges the authority of the prevailing text.

#### Activity 4

Look at any familiar text/ story you have read or heard without really thinking about the way in which the female character has been portrayed. If the character is shown as meek and subservient, inhabiting a world that is ruled by men and with no voice of her own to protest against indignities she is subjected to, how can the story be told differently with the framework given above?

Let us take as an example: in the Hindi poem, *Saket*, the poet, Maithili Sharan Gupta looks at the sequence of events in the *Ramayana* from the perspective of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife who is left behind in Ayodhya while Rama, Lakshmana and Sita go away to the forest for fourteen years. In this work (which can be described as a good example of alternate histories), we hear Urmila speaking about what it is like to be in Ayodhya without the three celebrated characters. In the paeans sung in praise of the ideal brother, Lakshmana, where is the song for Urmila? Why is she not celebrated as the ideal wife? Maithili Sharan Gupta's verse is an attempt to bring her into our field of awareness and foreground her point of view. In doing so, he gives voice to someone who has been silenced and perhaps all but forgotten in our collective consciousness.

In another interesting work, *Saapa Vimochanam*, a Tamil story, the writer Pudhumaipittan takes up the story of Ahilya from where it is left off in the *Ramayana*. Once she is free of the curse and has turned back from a stone into a woman, she and her husband, the Rishi Gautama take up the reins of their household once again, trying to forget the past and forge new bonds of togetherness with each other. When Rama returns victorious from Lanka, he comes to their ashram, accompanied by Sita who tells Ahilya in a very matter-of-fact manner, about her trial by fire – the agni pariksha. Ahilya is horrified and in a moment, the high regard for Rama crashes to something like contempt and she voluntarily turns back into stone. This story brings to the forefront the perspective of the woman and forces us to look anew at the myths accepted so unquestioningly for ages.

#### Activity 5

Try to read some of the Indian myths that have been re-written. This will enable you to understand how there is a shift in perspective.

When you look up information in a book, you will notice that the information is given in a sequence. Information may also be given in a hierarchical manner especially in books dealing with governmental systems. In narratives (especially literary works) the importance of the temporal (relating to time) and spatial (relating to space) forms cannot be denied. As you read, your mind (memory) retains what you have read and anticipates what is to come. This interplay between retaining and anticipating leads the reader into understanding a literary work.

You must remember that there is a difference between a literary (fictional) work and a non-literary work. It is not necessary that a literary work will unfold itself in a chronological manner. The story may begin from any point of time. The writer, often a skilful wordsmith, compels the reader's mind to move back and forth in time and space before the reader has a complete understanding of the story. One recalls to mind Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* for which Roy won the Booker Award. This novel presents the world from a child's perspective and deftly moves across time, taking the reader from the characters' adulthood to childhood at various times during the telling of the story.

**Activity 6**

Please read the novel *The God of Small Things*. Make a note of the number of times that the narrative shifts from past to present. How does this shift affect the story? Does it add or take away from its impact?

There are a number of stories/narratives where the omniscient writer narrates the story and thus presents a single point of view. Charles Dickens's stories fall in this category. Or you may have different story tellers who offer their own perspectives of the same situation like Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*. You must have read some novels of Dickens as part of your graduation course. In Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, the omniscient narrator tells us the story of Pip, an orphan who has been grudgingly brought up by his sister and her husband Joe Gargery, a blacksmith. This novel has autobiographical streaks: Charles Dickens had fallen in love with the actress Ellen Ternan with whom he had acted in a play. Ellen Ternan is immortalized as Estella in the novel *Great Expectations*. So we find that there is a mix of perspectives – the autobiographical and the fictional.

In *Wuthering Heights* we have a remarkably complex art of narration. The novel has 34 chapters and begins with the arrival of Mr. Lockwood as a tenant of Thrushcross Grange, a property rented from Mr. Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights. The story is initially told by Mr. Lockwood who undergoes a nightmarish experience when he spends a night at Wuthering Heights. In this novel, Bronte makes use of the supernatural element as right in the beginning, Lockwood sees the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw Linton when he spends a night at the Heights. The narration is subsequently taken up by Nelly Dean, (also spelt as Nellie Dean) the housekeeper at Thrushcross Grange. In Nelly, Bronte creates a natural story teller. Nelly's role is that of an insider-outsider – for although she is not part of the family and is now in Thrushcross Grange, she had spent almost all of her younger days in Wuthering Heights. She tells Lockwood how Heathcliff had been picked up by Mr. Earnshaw, father of Catherine and Hindley when he had returned from a visit to Liverpool.

Nelly Dean tries to give an impartial account of the people living in Wuthering Heights. She also tells Lockwood that the nearest neighbours of the Earnshaws were the Lintons who lived across the moors at Thrushcross Grange with their two children Edgar and Isabella. The narrative moves back and forth in time and space as Nelly narrates how the Grange moved into Heathcliff's hands.

As the novel comes to an end, we have the return of Mr. Lockwood. There is a new housekeeper at the Grange and Nelly Dean is once again the housekeeper at Wuthering Heights. Young Cathy (daughter of Catherine and Edgar Linton and Hareton (Son of Hindley Earashaw and Frances) have become friends and are soon to get married. After marriage, Cathy and Hareton are to move to Thrushcross Grange, and Nelly Dean would also move with them. Old Joseph is to remain as caretaker at the Heights.

The story and the characters come alive through the shift in perspective that is accorded to the narrative by the shift in story-tellers. Through Lockwood we get an outsider's view while Nelly gives us a more detailed, intimate look at the lives of the characters since she has seen them all their lives. There is also the shift in time and space that lends a layered texture to the novel.

### Activity 7

Pick up a novel that has been told by one narrator and see how different it is from a novel in which several narrators present the story. Which do you think is more interesting? Why?

## 1.4 AUDIO-VISUAL NARRATIVES

In the earlier section we had discussed how perspectives change with the passage of time as one grows up or are transformed when one migrates to a new place. Let us now see how audio-visual presentations can change our perspective towards certain issues.

You must have heard of the saying ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. Audio-visual presentations create stronger impressions and better retention as images are known to get more effectively engraved in the brain. Films enable the viewers to understand the subtle nuances of human relationships. One may miss this out when one is only reading a play or novel. The use of the visual technique enables us to understand what has been stated and what has not been explicitly said by the writer. In films, the role of the director is important because he is the one who is shaping the novel into a film. He knows how much to present and how much to conceal: so there is a shift in perspective. It is no longer the writer’s perspective - the viewer sees the film as the director presents it (point of view of the director). Biopics (biographies made into film) have always been favoured by directors all over the world. The Hindi film, *Bhagh Milkha Bhagh*, on Milkha Singh who was called “the flying Sikh”, is a case in point.

It is interesting to read Milkha Singh’s autobiography *The Race of My Life* to understand Milkha Singh’s perspective. We shall begin by talking about what is meant by autobiography. Autobiographies present a totally different perspective: that of the writer who is writing his/her life. In autobiographies, the writer narrates his/her own history, as s/he perceives it. This genre has been practiced from ancient times. The word “autobiography” was probably first used by Robert Southey in 1809 when he wrote about the works of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Viera. In earlier times when a person wrote the story of his/her life then the word “self biography” was used (see Robert Folkenflik ed. *The Culture of Autobiography: Construction of Self Representations*). Roy Pascal in his book, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* writes that people write autobiographies because they are keen that people should read about their lives. Autobiographies, at times, are inspirational and such writings can encourage a person to overcome his/her difficulties and meet challenges bravely. Autobiographical writings enable the reader to understand the thought processes and behavioural patterns of the writers. Autobiographies can begin at any point of time. The writers need not present the events in a chronological form and may choose to focus on only those anecdotes and episodes which have played a momentous role in shaping their lives. They may begin to tell the story of their life from a particular moment and then go back to past incidents that have shaped the course of their journey. They may also focus on only a part of their life and the experiences therein. As the authors look back at their life’s history, they may choose to comment on the ideas that shaped their mindset and the people who have helped to mould their personality. Autobiographies are supposed to be truthful accounts of a person’s life but the truth may not be very clearly stated. Sometimes a writer writes his/her life story at a very young age. S/he may live on to a ripe old age, but does not publish a sequel, preferring to let the earlier work speak for them. In an autobiography, the writer recalls past events from memory, reconstructs them

in his/her mind and then presents them before the readers. Thus memory plays a great role in the writing of an autobiography. The Wordsworthian concept of “emotions recollected in tranquility” may perhaps be said to hold valid for writers who write their life stories.

In Milkha Singh’s autobiography *The Race of My Life* Milkha Singh tells us how running and winning races made him earn the title the “flying Sikh”. When one reads his autobiography, one realizes that Milkha has been quite candid and this quality makes the autobiography an amazing read. It begins with a short prologue in which the writer tells us about the experiences that are related to his passion and skill for running - “fleeing the massacre on that fearsome night when most of my family was slaughtered, racing trains for fun... leaving every one behind in my first race as an army jawan so that I could get an extra glass of milk”.

Milkha Singh’s autobiography follows a chronological order. It tells us about his trials and tribulations, his angst and anguish as he led an almost solitary life after the massacre of his parents and some members of his family. His autobiography makes one realize that despite his varied problems, Milkha was determined to work and carve out a name for himself.

The title of the biopic “Bhaag Milkha Bhaag” refers to Milkha’s father entreating him to run away when the Muslim rioters attacked his village and family during the partition of India and Pakistan. Running enabled him to survive the slaughter subsequent to which he led the life of an impoverished refugee in India. Milkha fell into bad company and was sent to jail. However, he was keen to join the army and his brother Makhan helped him in this endeavour. After that there was no turning back for Milkha and the rest is history.

The autobiography *The Race of My Life* and the biopic *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* together enable us to see and understand Milkha Singh from two different perspectives (one is the view point of the writer as he writes his life story; the other is the view point/perspective of the director who presents before us in cinematic form, the life story of Milkha Singh). Visual impact is always lasting because of the impression it leaves in the mind. The film on Milkha Singh helps us to realise the problems faced by Milkha right from the time of partition when he ran to save his life. The director and the writer’s perspective is different. The thought process involved in writing about the feelings and reactions of the characters are expressed easily with the help of words. A visual medium can give a photographic representation of the thought process but it may not be adequate.

You must have read William Shakespeare’s plays *Hamlet* and *Othello*. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s father’s ghost tells Hamlet how he (Hamlet’s father) was murdered in the garden. The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge this murder. Now, Hamlet is in a moral dilemma. The question before him is whether to believe the ghost or disbelieve it and he wonders whether the devil has taken on the garb of his father’s ghost. While watching the film (a BBC production) one can read Hamlet’s mind through his facial reactions. One also notes how perturbed Claudius is about Hamlet’s changed behavior. Claudius is Hamlet’s uncle who had crowned himself King of Denmark after the death of Hamlet’s father. Moreover, much to Hamlet’s sorrow and dismay, Claudius had married Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother. Hamlet felt that his mother was in a great hurry to remarry and she had thereby insulted the sacred memory of his father. Hamlet’s moral dilemma is reflected in the famous speech “To be or not to be that is the question”.

In Shakespeare's plays, soliloquies and asides are of great importance. These speeches and comments enable the reader to understand what is going on in the mind of the speaker. When one sees these plays as films, the impact is greater as visual narratives enable us to understand the personalities of the characters. Audio-visual presentations enable the viewer to hear and see what the characters are doing/saying: the viewer's sensory perceptions of sight and hearing are both involved and thus make the experience more vivid.

Intonation also plays a great role in our understanding of a film. Long after you have left the cinema hall, you remember the way certain dialogues were delivered and you re-appreciate the film. The play and its visual representation have a strong impact on the minds of the readers and makes us realize that we are all Hamlets without being Prince of Denmark. In performative texts (which are performed for an audience on stage) the viewer also notes the inter-play between light and sound, the speeches and silences of the characters, and the way their moods are depicted. Performative texts have their own specificities, limitations and parameters. By specificities is meant that certain characteristics are specific to a person: for example a person may gesture in the same way as his father did. A play has its own limitations: it may be a period play (limited in a time frame). A play may have its own parameters and it should be evaluated according to those norms. An audio visual narrative i.e. a film can effectively capture past scenes with the help of the flashback technique. Freeze shots heighten the emotional elements in a film. Thus a film and a play performed on the stage are different in their approach.

#### Activity 8

Try and see the film *Hamlet*. How is it different from the experience of reading the play?

It is interesting to note that books on the partition i.e. partition tales and films on the theme of partition present a shift in perspective. Audio visual methods highlight the trauma of partition.

#### Activity 9

You could watch the movie *Pinjar* which is based on Partition. Read Khushwant's Singh *Train to Pakistan* and see how it has been adapted into a film. Also, Bhisham Sahni's novel *Tamas*, made into a TV serial of the same name, is worth exploring in both its forms.

This section has enabled you to understand how visual explicitness enables the viewer to follow closely the actions of people as they interact with one another. Audio-visual narratives also focus on the setting and this also lends authenticity to a text.

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## 1.5 INTER-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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In large measure, cultural components shape our lives and our attitude towards certain issues. India is a land of diverse cultures and traditions. The Vindhya mountain range divides India into two parts: north and south and it is interesting to see how the customs and traditions of the people of the South differ from those of the North.

**Activity 10**

Try and recall if you have witnessed a Pongal or an Onam festival that is celebrated with great fanfare in the South. Also the Dusshera festival in Mysore is different from the festival in Bengal and Gujarat. You could read up some material on the festivals of India. Jot down what the differences are. How are the same festivals celebrated differently? What are the reasons?

Right at the beginning we must define for ourselves the meaning of the term “inter-cultural”. The term means relating to, involving, or representing different cultures. Inter-cultural perspectives would therefore reveal how our point of view undergoes changes when we interact with people from other cultures. Very often when you visit a place you notice that the food the inhabitants of that area eat is slightly different from the one that you eat at home. This encourages you to look more closely at their culture, their dress and their customs. You notice certain similarities in their habits and traditions, but what remains etched in your mind is the difference.

When marriages take place between people of two cultures, both of them have to make adjustments: this adjustment leads to an assimilation of cultures and an inter-cultural exchange which affects the perspective of the partners as well as their families and friends.

**Activity 11**

You could read the novel *Guide* by R.K. Narayan and note the way in which the relationship between Raju and the dancer Rosy evolves. What role does the culture difference play in the making and marring of their relationship? Also, how does this difference affect Rosy’s marriage with Marco?

Indians are a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious group of people. You will notice that Indians who go abroad to study or work, assimilate the culture of that place. The first generation Indian settlers had some problems adjusting to a changed cultural and social scenario. The first generation settlers looked back with longing and nostalgia towards the land (their ‘home’) that they had left and they looked forward with anxiety and anticipation to their ‘new home’. But the second generation Indian settlers were quick to adopt the customs and conventions of the foreign land which was now home to them. Diasporic writing offers another perspective: it presents both the foreign land and the motherland through a different lens. Also, there is a great difference in the way in which first generation settlers view both and how their descendants do so.

**Activity 12**

Read the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Note: It is difficult for Asima to adjust to the American way of life. Her son, Gogol, has no such problems for he has blended into the culture.

Inter-cultural perspectives are shaped by a mixing and blending of apparently different modes of cultural experiences. When one begins to contemplate these socio cultural experiences, one realizes that an encounter with the cultures of the world promotes the concept of peace and harmony. Readers who read such books develop a better understanding and tolerance of those who are different in various ways. The writer’s description and commentary on the social landscape helps the reader to arrive at a mature evaluation of a hitherto unknown cultural zone. We often have a vague idea of the culture, customs and conventions of people of other

communities. Our perspective is widened and our understanding improves when we read books which present inter-cultural perspectives.

The eminent poet and scholar, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore through his collection of poetical offerings – *Gitanjali* (a collection of poems from Tagore’s various anthologies of poetry written in Bengali) - brought the world to Indian shores. Tagore was the first Indian to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for this collection in 1913 for which the eminent Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote the introduction. Tagore translated some of his poems into English so that they could be appreciated by a wider audience. He had already established himself as a writer and scholar of Bengali Literature and most of the poems in *Gitanjali* were songs, set to music by Tagore himself.

On reading the *Gitanjali*, the Western World realised the ennobling power of these poems. The poems were not only spiritually uplifting, but the musical cadence therein elevated the mind and soul of the reader. The concept of an artist both writing a poem and setting it to music was not very common in Western Literature. The names of composers like Wagner and others were familiar to western readers, but that there was such a composer in the Eastern part of the world was something unimaginable to them. Critic Reba Som, in her book, *Rabindranath Tagore The Singer and his Song* (2009), emphasises the spiritual quality embedded in the poems and songs of Tagore.

### Activity 13

Try and procure a copy of *Gitanjali*; read it to experience the spirituality that oozes out from this collection. What impact do you think it would have had on a western audience? Would they have responded or understood it in the same way as Indian readers would have?

In this section you have seen how inter-cultural presentations broaden our vision and change our perspectives towards certain issues. This shift in perspective makes the reader realize that a book need not be read from one single point of view.

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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This unit on shifting perspectives must have made you realize that no one perspective prevails for a long time. Our perspectives change as we grow up and mature with time and age. Perspectives also change when one travels from place to place. There is a shift in perspective when we watch films - even those films whose texts we have read and are familiar with. Audio-visual perspectives play a great role in sharpening our understanding skills. Dialogue delivery, sound, music, and the backdrop go a long way in promoting a deep sense of appreciation in the minds of the viewers.

Inter-cultural perspectives wherein local similes and idioms are used, enable us to realize the richness of the various cultures that dot the globe. Writings by Indian writers also reinforce our vision of India as a land of diverse cultures. We hope that this unit on shifting perspectives has broadened your mind-sets and helped you to understand the relationship between a reader and an author/narrator. Comparative Literature attempts to give you an overview of the literature of the world. Readers begin to realize that while there is a certain harmony in the literatures of the world, there are differences in approach. While writing about an issue, a writer often “coins” words which express his/her point of view. Such “coinages” add to our Vocabulary

and aid us in our understanding of certain concepts and comparisons. Whenever you read a text try and compare the writer and the text with a contemporary writer and his/her work. Also try and see whether the writer and his/her work is relevant to your times. This will enable you to understand it better and place it in a certain framework related to time, space, ideology or other perspectives.

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## 1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) How is a course on comparative literature beneficial in understanding culture?
- 2) Why do perspectives change? How do they influence our understanding of a work?
- 3) What are the factors that promote inter-disciplinary studies?
- 4) What enables a reader to appreciate a text?
- 5) Why should we not accept Eurocentric norms blindly?
- 6) Why are Indians myths being re-written?
- 7) Do you think audio-visual presentations are helpful to the students? Explain why you think so.
- 8) Make a comparison of any one film you have seen and the text from which it has been adapted.

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## UNIT 2 PRATIBHA RAY'S *YAJNASENI*: THE STORY OF DRAUPADI

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Pratibha Ray
- 2.3 Retelling
- 2.4 *Yajnaseni*
- 2.5 *Yajnaseni* as a Feminist Text
- 2.6 Let us Sum Up
- 2.7 Unit End Questions
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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In Block 7, we continue to explore the Exchanges and Negotiations with epics that you did in Block 6 except for one difference—the focus of the two books in this block, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*—is on Draupadi. In both the novels Draupadi (also called Krishnaa) is the central protagonist and you get to see the epic mainly through her point of view. A discussion of these texts will help you see how Draupadi emerges as an amazingly modern and contemporary woman in the way the two authors have portrayed her. By the end of this unit you will be able to appreciate the importance of perspective in the telling of a story and how a shift in perspective can change the interpretation of familiar stories. You will also be able to appreciate the feminist slant given by the author we will discuss in this unit.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Block 6, Unit 1 you learnt about the telling and retelling of epics by studying two texts, Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* and Dharmvir Bharati's *Andhayug* in Alok Bhalla's translation. One can safely assume that almost all the readers, including yourself who read these books, already know the story of *Mahabharata* and yet, here are two books that became famous and sought after by readers. Why?

Why would we want to read about a story that we are already familiar with? One reason could be that we expect a fresh insight into the epic. By negotiating with the narrative of *Mahabharata*, the two authors along with the reader have an exchange of perception that throw a fresh light on the same epic that you may have heard about since you were a child.

Let us get to know the author Pratibha Ray and her background.

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## 2.2 PRATIBHA RAY

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One of the best known novelists and short story writers in Odia, Pratibha Ray was a Professor of Education and taught in colleges in Odisha for a long period before she joined the Public Service Commission of Odisha as a Member.

She was brought up in a village where she went to Balikuda High School and her father was the Head Master of the same school. Growing up in the environs of a village, the child Pratibha was drawn to trees, birds, the changing seasons and all that was a part of the freshness of nature. She started writing at the age of nine and wrote poems on the beauty of nature to which she was so greatly attracted. She shares an interesting experience that every established writer can relate to – the initial rejection of what she wrote and her continued persistence in writing and finally acceptance.

She wrote poems secretly, without the knowledge of her parents, and sent them to *Prajatantra*, a reputed newspaper founded by the eminent freedom fighter and former chief minister of Odisha, Sri. Harekrishna Mahtab. None of them got published and Ray thought it was because her 'vocabulary was limited.' So she consulted a dictionary, took out some 'difficult' words, used them in her next poems and sent them to the paper. These poems also did not get published. Although disappointed, she never gave up hope. One fine day, her father found her name in the newspaper and that was a moment of joy and triumph for both father and daughter. With that began her journey as a writer. She has received many honours including the country's prestigious Bharatiya Jnanpith award.

Besides *Yajnaseni*, Pratibha Ray's best books include *Magnamati* about the fisher folk of Erasama and the deluge that destroyed the Jatadhari forests, *Adi Bhoomi*-The Primal Land which is about the Bonda tribes, *Mahamoha* based on the life of Ahalya, *Maharaniputra* and many collections of short stories. Her novel *Yajnaseni* was adapted as a popular television serial and telecast on the channel Sahara One. And her novel *Mahamoha* was choreographed as an Odishi dance ballet.

Pratibha Ray is often commended for the deep compassion in her vision and the wide thematic range of her works. The award citation of Sahitya Akademi, 2000 reads: "*Ullanghan*, the award-winning collection of 21 short stories, is noted for the deft handling of human frailties with compassion and a unique world-view. The author has succeeded in maintaining a fine balance between the literary and the colloquial. Her observations on human nature, on moments of man's transgression of moral limits, are poignantly put down in an effective blend of detachment and empathy. The work is considered a worthy contribution to Indian short fiction in Odia."

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## 2.3 RETELLING

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Most of us have gone through our childhood with a 'given' kind of a response to *Mahabharata*, and we were more or less conditioned to respond in a **certain** way to the epic and to the actions of the characters in this epic. But a writer who undertakes to tell or retell the same story has a special objective and s/he does it so well that your interest is drawn towards the new perspectives that emerge from the same epic. While the main outline of the story may remain the same, the messages that emerge have such a new sheen that one is struck by the relevance of this ancient epic to contemporary times. The *Mahabharata* could well be a story of our times!

The authors are well aware of their creative challenge in retelling an epic that is embedded in their own mind and in the consciousness of the readers since their childhood. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes in her Author's Note to *The Palace of Illusions*: "Like many Indian children, I grew up on the vast, varied, and fascinating tales of the Mahabharata" and adds that despite its strong women, "they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed

only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers, or husbands, or brothers or sons.” (2008: xiv) And if ever she wrote a book, she says: “I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men’s exploits...And who could be better suited for this than Panchali?” (2008: xv)

And Pratibha Ray declares in the Afterword to her novel: “Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. Such a woman who has faced torment, insult, mental and emotional dilemma like Yajnaseni Draupadi—has not yet been born on this earth. Portraying Krishnaa in the form of Yajnaseni, I am placing her before the culture-loving readers of my country.” (2002: 400-401) Ray is equally conscious of the fact that although Draupadi is placed centre stage in her novel, “...it is the supreme human being, Purushottam Krishna, who is the protagonist of the *Mahabharata*. Krishna and Krishnaa - through the integral link between these two names I have depicted a relationship of spiritual love.” (2000:401-402)

### Activity 1

Pick up a small story or an interesting anecdote. Tell it to a friend or family member. Now ask them to tell the story to someone else. Make a chain of such storytellers and then ask the last one to repeat the story to you. Do you find any changes? Why do you think these changes take place?

## 2.4 YAJNASENI

*Yajnaseni* is a retelling of the epic from the point of view of Draupadi. When you read *Yajnaseni* you can see how all or most of the events, episodes and sequences flow along in a way that is familiar to you because you must have read about them in other versions of *Mahabharata* or listened to them as stories. The characters are also the same as you have always known them to be. Yet, the structure of the book with Draupadi narrating the story of *Mahabharata* is startlingly different.

For instance, Draupadi’s first word as she begins the story is “Finis” and it is a letter to Krishna who is her best friend in good times and bad. She always addresses him as Priya Sakha and signs off the letter with “your dear Sakhi”. Draupadi feels that her last moment has come when her foot slips on the golden dust of Mount Meru while following her five husbands who were climbing in the Himalayas, ascending to Heaven. However, all her sacrifices, her travails, her loyalty to the five Pandavaas and her commitment to their cause are in vain as at the end of it all, she is deprived of attaining the pleasure of heaven. At this final stage of her troubled life she slips and falls in the foothills of the Himalayas and naturally expects at least one of her husbands to wait for her or help her up. Of all of them, only Bhima turns around and is concerned to see if she is hurt or needs assistance. But then the eldest brother Dharmaraj Yudhisthir, Lord of righteousness issues a heartless command: “Don’t look back. Move forward”. Not one of the others even glances at her or feels any sympathy for her plight. They all then just walk away, leaving her broken and helpless to wait for death!

Draupadi muses, “How false is this bond between a husband and a wife! Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender! If man suffers the consequences of his own deeds, then offering myself at the feet of five husbands for the sake of preserving Yudhishtir’s dharma, why did I have to bear the burden of the whole world’s mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander?”(3)

Draupadi is thus left behind on the Himalayas and in her last moments, she recalls her entire life that is the entire *Mahabharata* for Krishna and ends her letter again with the word 'Finis' at the end of the book, giving it a cyclic structure.

While she recalls her life, Draupadi is aware of the inexorable march of Time for she has passed an entire lifetime and feels that she is nearing her end. Now her grandson Parikshit, son of the slain Abhimanyu, is the anointed king of Hastinapur and that, according to Draupadi, marks the end of Dvaparayug and the advent of another *yug*, the Kaliyug. In writing the story of her life, Draupadi hopes that the people who will appear in Kaliyug would be able to tell the world if any woman has ever suffered insults the way she did in the Kuru court. Draupadi asks the readers in Kaliyug to evaluate her life and the way she had to traverse a path that was full of torment, many conflicts and confusions, all in the name of what was perceived as "dharma."

As the story unfolds right from her unusual birth when she emerged from the fire of a Yajna (hence called Yajnaseni), closely following her brother Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi takes us through all the phases in her life, from her growing up days in her father Drupad's palace, her youth, her famous *swayamvar*, and how it led on to a very strange arrangement – of marrying five husbands in order to preserve the word of honour given by the Pandava brothers to their mother Kunti.

In her narration, Yajnaseni takes us through the entire gamut of events, episodes and clashes of characters culminating in the big war in Kurukshetra that lasted for eighteen days. As you know very well, it is a pyrrhic victory in that the Pandavas do not at all feel jubilant about winning the war at the end. Relentlessly, Yajnaseni takes us further through the many post-war scenes of widowed women, orphaned children and empty palaces, and recounts how her son Abhimanyu was killed treacherously. Even Krishna, whom she, like everyone else, thought of as an immortal divinity, finally dies of an arrow, completing the curse of Gandhari. With that, the Yadav clan is almost wiped out. As you move on towards the end of the book, you can note how Yajnaseni concludes her narrative cyclically, by describing how she followed her five husbands on Mount Meru in the Himalayas and bringing us again to the start of her letter to Krishna.

What makes this narration different from the story of *Mahabharata* that you know? One of the things is the tone and voice of Draupadi as the narrator of the events. She is what one might call a 'thinking woman' who is indignant at the way she is treated and tossed about as if she has no say in any of the decisions that involve her. Along with her, we as readers are also appalled that a princess known for her valour, her knowledge of scriptures, her learning and her beauty, had to go through such humiliating situations. The most appalling thing is the way even senior members of the royal family seem to be impervious to the wrongs done to a woman who is no less than a princess. She has only her sakha, Krishna, to share them with because he is all-knowing, and she has always been aware of the spark of divinity that glowed within him. In the narration, Arjun is the only other person who recognizes the divinity in Krishna and it culminates in the famous, extraordinary and life-transforming event in the battlefield.

Both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* unfold the *Mahabharata* through the first person narrative of Draupadi who tells us 'the story of her life'. In Block 4 'Comparative World Literature', in Units 1 and 2, you learned about Life Writings and how an autobiography is written and read, and how it has to be taken as a Way of Looking at Reality. Being first person narratives, *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* also read at times like an autobiography by Draupadi.

### Activity 2

Both Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have recast the *Mahabharata* in such a way that it unfolds as a first person narrative in which Draupadi tells it as ‘the story of her life’. Do you think it makes the story more convincing, and does it read as if the epic has been authenticated by Draupadi? Jot down your views briefly.

## 2.5 YAJNASENI AS A FEMINIST TEXT

Although *Yajnaseni* is all about *Mahabharata*, in tone and temper, it can also be read as a feminist text because it throws up many gender-based issues and sensitizes the reader through the point of view of Draupadi who, through her personalized narrative, could actualize her ‘self’ even while she goes through a maze of complex situations.

Draupadi has a strong sense of her ‘self’. Born of fire, she has this inborn gift for being fearless and bold in many a situation. We noted how in her letter to Krishna, Draupadi had not only marked the time of Parikshit’s ascension to the throne of Hastinapur as one that marks the end of Dvaparayug and ushers in Kaliyug, she had also written the story of her life so that Kaliyug can decide if any other woman has faced insults the way Draupadi did in the Kuru court. We, the readers in Kaliyug, can very well understand that on one level, Draupadi’s narration of *Mahabharata* is from a distinctly feminist perspective.

There is no doubt when we read the book that Draupadi is first and foremost, a queen. She is fiercely intelligent, strong-willed and with an unabashed sense of pride in herself both as a woman and as a queen. When we look at other women from Indian mythology, we can see how hardly any of them were bold enough to speak out and express what they thought or felt. Draupadi is the exception. Even during one of the most humiliating experiences any woman can have, leave alone a queen, at the hands of Dushasana in the Kuru court filled with wise men, gurus and elder relatives, she has the courage and the strength to raise questions relating to dharma and the conduct of the elders while her husbands are mute spectators.

Draupadi’s fiery spirit is seen at its best when she is disrobed in front of everyone in the Kuru court. It is a cathartic moment in which Draupadi stretches to her full height and stands tall amongst the dwarfed men. Instead of dissolving in tears, Draupadi is enraged and that energizes her whole being. She takes a positive step to redeem the situation and appeals to Krishna. And then the miracle happens. Draupadi receives an unending supply of fabric from Krishna and it is Dushasana who in the end, swoons in exhaustion after pulling out sari after sari that continuously appears and drapes itself around Draupadi. Everyone in the Kuru court is astonished by the sight of this divine intervention and it remains an unforgettable scene for most of us till date.

When Draupadi questions the elders about the ignominy of this act with the words “I do not beg for anyone’s pity. I demand justice. To protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king”, (2002:238) she goes down in the annals of history as an exceptional woman who has the courage to question the formidable elders of the royal family.

In Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi makes a wry comment about what she had read long ago in a book, not ever imagining that it may come true for

her one day: "The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave." (2008:190)

### Activity 3

Cite instances of similarity and difference between Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* and in *The Palace of Illusions* and in their mode of narration. How much of the wit and humour in *The Palace of Illusions* can be attributed to the choice of language or the author's way of looking at things?

Draupadi is, paradoxically enough, both the strength of the Pandavas' and their weakness. Her mocking laughter is what goads Duryodhana on to take revenge and it is her stubbornness to avenge the insults heaped upon her in the court that propels their journey into the tragedy of the great war and brings about destruction of such epic proportions. One could say that given the circumstances in which Draupadi and her brother were called into existence and the purpose for which this was done – to take revenge – it is perhaps not really surprising that revenge should be an elemental part of her make up and something that runs strongly through her personality and vision. While she herself was born as an instrument of revenge, she, in her turn, goads her loved ones relentlessly towards revenge, resulting in the tragic great war.

Draupadi's response to the happenings in her life are essentially what one might say "a thinking woman's" reaction in the way it is invariably intelligent, clear and unclouded by crusty conventions or sentimentalism. You can further note a healthy scepticism in the way she examines certain lofty terms such as "dharma", "honour" and so on, because the terms have an obsolete ring in the context of her changing life. In contemporary times too, we notice how these high-sounding terms come up for a scathing attack in the media and by the intellectual community that would review their relevance to our times to expose the underlying hypocrisy, the regressive mindset and blatant double standards that are clothed within these pious terms.

Let us look at an example from the book. Draupadi bursts the myth around the much romanticized notion of a *swayamvar* by exposing the sham behind the idea of her *swayamvar*. After Arjun wins her hand in the *swayamvar* and she accompanies him to his home along with his brothers, Kunti inadvertently asks the five brothers to "share" whatever they got equally. Yudhisthir as the eldest brother vows that obeying Kunti should be the first supreme aim in their lives. All the brothers silently agree. But Draupadi muses: "Did I have no say? Then what was the meaning of the *swayamvar*? Why did Father prescribe such conditions for it? Which conditions have these brothers fulfilled for marrying me? I had placed the garland of bridegroom-choice around the neck of one already. By law, and according to dharma, it was he alone who was my husband. Why should I accept the other brothers as husbands? Would that not destroy my dharma?" (2002:56)

Draupadi's mind rebels against what is clearly an atrocity on her sensibility as a woman. At this point, she subverts other epics courageously and questions why Sita in Ramayana never had to face this dilemma and the brothers Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughna could be loyal to Rama without getting Sita as their wife. Draupadi is tormented by the shame and ridicule that she would have to suffer because of this preposterous condition to her marriage. She would later face the biting sarcasm of Karna about her marriage.

Draupadi is conscious right from the beginning of her life that she has come into existence in order to fulfil her father's vow of taking revenge on Guru Dronacharya.

She is first offered as a bride to Krishna and this thrills her. But then Krishna tells her father that as she was not an ordinary woman, a svayamvar should be arranged for her. He further tells him that his great friend, Arjuna would be the most suitable man, worthy to be lovely Draupadi's husband. For Dhruvad, the only thing that mattered was that his son-in-law should be a great warrior – whether Krishna or Arjuna – capable of defeating Drona's arrogance. But Draupadi thinks: "The garland that I had been weaving since the morning to put round Krishna's neck would have to be put around Arjun's neck. That too at Krishna's behest! Did I have no wish of my own? No desire? No craving? Simply because I was 'Yajnaseni' - born of the sacrificial fire? My birth, life and death - all were directed by someone else. Why had I come and why should I remain alive? Why should I die? What was their intention? I knew nothing." (24)

And then Draupadi is informed about the death of the Pandavas in their wax palace. The svayamsar would still take place but what of Draupadi's own feelings? This is what she thinks: "First I was offered to Krishna. He did not accept me and ordained that I was for his friend - Arjun. I did not feel any hesitation as Arjun had been born of a portion of Krishna himself. But if someone other than Arjun succeeded in the test due to my father's relaxations, how can I taint my soul by wedding that person? (33) What rankles in her mind is that although she was educated and capable of thinking for herself, she was given absolutely no choice in her choice of husband. Dhruvad was not so interested in finding someone who would cherish his daughter as he was in obtaining a son in law who would avenge his insult.

#### Activity 4

Do you think it is really a 'svayamvara' when conditions are set by the father? What are your views on this part of the *Mahabharata*?

You can note another instance of a feminist dimension in the way Draupadi interrogates the very basis of a man "sacrificing women" when he takes a standard vow with a blandness that smacks of a smug male self-assurance. Towards the end when Arjun declares: "I vow before everyone that till I have killed Karna I shall abstain from wine, meat and Draupadi herself," (2002:305) Draupadi questions this rather conventional vow from her perspective. What is the place of a woman, or a wife, in a man's life, she asks. We 'hear' her thoughts in her first person narrative: "why do they take vows to remain far from women until they achieve their desired goal? Does the company of a woman suck out the strength of a man? Is this lack of confidence in the strength of his character or is it due to the fear of a woman's charismatic attraction?" (2002:305). She wonders if all this is a proof of a man's "firmness or weakness" (2002:305). Both Ray and Divakaruni portray Draupadi as she is in the original epic — she is educated, diligently studies the scriptures, is learned and takes a keen interest in statecraft. In both the novels, Draupadi shuns the company of the frivolous palace women who chew betel leaf to redden their lips and exchange recipes for love potions. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi takes up the book *Nyaya Shastra* and studies it after her brother has finished his lessons with a scholarly tutor. She wants to know how *Nyaya Shastra* sets out the laws of the land. Likewise, Ray's Yajnaseni in her eponymous novel also prefers to learn the scriptures that her father initiates her in and is known by everyone as a princess of great learning.

Draupadi, as we can see, is a woman of learning and exceptional courage. Is such a woman accepted in the Dvaparayug? Do you recall the context in which Shakuni speaks against Draupadi as a woman who asks unsettling questions because she is a learned woman? He goes so far as to say that she brought much ruin upon herself

because she is educated. The incident is the infamous disrobing of Draupadi in the court after Yudhishtra has gambled her away. When Dushasana tugs at her hair in front of all the elders in the Kuru court in spite of her tearful entreaties, Draupadi addresses the elders and questions the ethics of such an action. Here is an excerpt from the book:

“In my condition is it not shameful to drag me by the hair into this crowded hall? Will no one answer my question? All were silent. A mild murmur arose and died down...Shakuni said to Karna: ‘The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus! If she had groveled at our feet and begged, perhaps she might have escaped such a gross insult. Just as knowledge and power enhances a man’s attraction, similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman. However, Draupadi, strengthened by pride in her learning and wisdom, is like a burning tongue of flame. Can anyone have pity on her?’” (2002:238)

### Activity 5

Read what Draupadi has to say when she is asked by Satyabhama how she is able to sustain and keep the affections of her five husbands (314-15). Do you think it is a feminist stance? Write down your views.

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

In both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is told very early in life that she is born to fulfill a vow and to change history. In *Yajnaseni*, her own brother whom she loves very much, tells her clearly: “We were both born from the sacrificial altar for the protection of dharma. Therefore, like ghee from the flaming altar, we will have to be consecrated to destroy the agony and sins of the world.” (2002:31) In Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi remarks: “I didn’t fear the fate they imagined for me. I had no intention of committing honorable self-immolation. (I had other plans for my life). But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit — or harm — them.” (2008:118)

We get to hear Draupadi’s unspoken (but written) thoughts because it is a first person narrative. For the same reason, we get a glimpse of the rare bonding Draupadi has with Krishna. There is a quality of implicit trust in her surrender to Krishna. About this relationship Draupadi declares disarmingly: “The name of that relationship is not known to me.”

The entire book seems to be written for the reader of today, as you would understand when you read Pratibha Ray’s Afterword.

Even after Krishna explains towards the end that the war is a ‘conflict between dharma and adharma’, Draupadi, who is an independent woman with a mind of her own, questions the killing of the unarmed Karna by Arjun at the behest of Krishna, when Karna was attending to the wheel of his chariot that was stuck in the mud. She wonders how Arjun could kill the unarmed son of Kunti and therefore his eldest brother and still call the scene the field of dharma. It is in the way Draupadi interrogates established and conventional schools of thought that she comes across as a woman of our times who bravely contests norms and clichéd thinking that are not beneficial to women, or even to mankind, for that matter.

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## 2.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is the reason given by Yajnaseni to Krishna for starting her letter with the word 'Finis' and ending it again with the same word? What is the well known imagery used by Krishna to describe that life is eternal?
- 2) Does the author's Afterword at the end of *Yajnaseni* give you an added dimension about the modernity of Draupadi? In what way does it help you understand the intent of the author?
- 3) Identify lines and passages from the book that show the feminist side of Draupadi's personality. What is her wish for the women of posterity?
- 4) In the journey of her life as Krishnaa, the Sakhi of Krishna, as Draupadi, Panchali and of course Yajnaseni, how does she actualize her 'self' through a skilful negotiation of all the roles that are imposed on her?
- 5) Is there a difference in the way Draupadi spends her last living moments in *Yajnaseni* and in *The Palace of Illusions*?

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## UNIT 3 CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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### Structure

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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Retellings, versions, of the classical Hindu epic *Mahabharata* in many languages and forms constitute a literary tradition as hoary and venerable as the epics themselves. In this unit, we discuss one such retelling of the *Mahabharata* — Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee's English novel *The Palace of Illusions* which presents the story of the *Mahabharata* as filtered and reflected through the perspective of Draupadi. We will attempt to see whether her narration provides a different perspective on the epic. At the same time, we will also analyze the novel in its own right, as a woman's narrative on the events and people in her life and of the world she inhabits. By the end of the unit we hope to be able to give you some understanding of how a shifted perspective narrative works, and how a woman's narrative voice can challenge established patriarchal world-views.

We strongly recommend that you procure a copy of the novel and read it before you study this unit.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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When AK Ramanujan states that no Indian reads the *Mahabharata* for the first time and that, when s/he does get to read it, s/he does not usually, read it in Sanskrit (Ramanujan 161), he is of course stating the obvious in these lines — that children in Indian families often grow up hearing stories from the *Mahabharata* (and the other classical Hindu epic *Ramayana*) even before they read it. His words also point to another important aspect — that these epics have lent themselves to local versions across centuries in both the oral and the written traditions.

Translations of the epics are among the earliest written works in most Indian literatures, and stories and characters from them frequently figure as stereotypes or archetypes in literary works even now. But what would you make of *modern* retellings of these epics? And that too in English?

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## 3.2 RETELLINGS

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C. Rajagopalachari's hugely popular English translation of the *Mahabharata* was meant primarily for children. Other translations by R. K. Narayan, P. Lal, William Buck, Shanta Rameshwar Rao and Kamala Subramaniam were, like Rajagopalachari's, abridged versions that sought to convey the timeless essence and flavour of the epic, making it more accessible to a modern, English-speaking, Western or Westernized readership. Yet others have attempted modern re-workings of the epic that relate it to contemporary life. For example, in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" the protagonist Dropdi Mejhen is a tribal revolutionary, an activist in the Bengal Naxalbari movement, who is gang-raped by soldiers while in custody in a bid to break the insurgent movement. She is a metaphor of resistance, remaining unbroken even after the trauma, and instead turning the reader's gaze onto the perpetrators of the injustice.

An interesting form of epic retellings is the 'shifted perspective retelling' — which focuses on the lives and experiences of specific characters and presents the epic through their consciousness or perspective. One of the earliest examples of this kind of retelling is the Sanskrit playwright Bhasa's *Urubhanga* which presents the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Duryodhana (the chief villain in most versions of the epic) who is portrayed as a generous prince mindful of family honour. Other examples of such retellings are Shivaji Sawant's Marathi novel *Mrityunjay* which is an account of Karna's trials; Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (Odiya) and PK Balakrishnan's *Ini Nhan Urangatte* ("And Now Let me Sleep", Malayalam) which present the epic from the perspective of the Pandavas' queen Draupadi; and *Randamoozham* (Malayalam), a novel by MT Vasudevan Nair written in the voice of the second Pandava, Bhima.

Such retellings can be particularly interesting for a reader who already knows the story of the epic, since they open up new ways of looking at the story. They indicate how differently the *Mahabharata* — its stories and characters — is perceived and interpreted across the culturally and socially diverse regions of India. Such retellings thus celebrate the plurality of the epic's narrative and its interpretations, and challenge the notion of a master narrative, an 'original, authoritative, Sanskrit version'.

### Activity 1

Before we launch into a discussion of the text, we'd like you to take a minute to reflect on what you've read so far in this unit. Do you know of any local version of the *Mahabharata*, in your own language, or specific to the region you belong to? Is there anything significantly different in this version – in terms of the way certain characters or stories in the epic are portrayed or narrated? And does this run counter to, or at least differ from, the popularly known version? Think about it in the light of what we've said thus far about versions of the *Mahabharata* and jot down your thoughts.

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### 3.3 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni, *The Palace of  
Illusions*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American writer (a writer of Indian origin domiciled in the United States of America). After a bachelor's degree from the University of Calcutta, in 1976, at the age of 19, she immigrated to the United States where she continued her education, earning a master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

She began her career as a poet and continues to write and publish poetry. Her first collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage*, won her several awards. She has written 16 novels, of which the best known are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart* and *Queen of Dreams*. *The Mistress of Spices* was made into a film of the same name in 2005, directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, (who also co-authored the script for the film with his wife, Gurinder Chadha). Another novel *Sister of my Heart* was made into a television series in Tamil and aired in India, as *Anbulla Snegithiye* (Loving Friend).

Her work is generally located within the genre of diasporic or immigrant writing. Thus many of her works deal with the South Asian immigrant experience, with people torn between their native cultures and the culture of their adopted country. For example, her first collection of stories *Arranged Marriages* contains narratives of immigrant brides struggling to carve out their identity as they are caught in the conflicting pressures of liberation and tradition. Her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* is in the magic realist mode, portraying a mystical India through an Indian store-keeper who sells spices against the realist background of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. According to her official website ([www.chitradivakaruni.com](http://www.chitradivakaruni.com)) "her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth, and the joys and challenges of living in a multi-cultural world."

Talking about her writing, Divakaruni once said "There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious - the essence of spirituality - that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community." (cited in Bredemus)

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### 3.4 THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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*The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008, is a retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi or Panchaali, the wife of the five Pandava brothers. At the outset, we'd like to point out that there are two possible entry points into the novel:

- i) as readers who know the *Mahabharata*, (mostly Indian readers) for whom the interest would lie in seeing what new perspective the novel offers on the epic; and
- ii) as readers who do not know the *Mahabharata* (mostly Western readers), who might interpret the novel as magical realist (due to its blending of the fantastic or magical with the realistic), or as portraying the cultural heritage of the author to a western audience, typical of immigrant writing.

In her "Author's Note" at the beginning of the novel, Divakaruni says that she had grown up listening to the stories of the *Mahabharata* "in the lantern-lit evenings at my grandfather's village home" (Divakaruni, p xiv) and that she had always been

“dissatisfied with the portrayal of the women in these stories” (*ibid*), a feeling that persisted into adulthood when she read the *Mahabharata* herself. She goes on to say that she had thought, even as a child, that if she ever wrote a book, she “would place the women in the forefront of the action”, that she would “uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men’s exploits. Better still I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it.(*ibid*)” Panchaali, or Draupadi, she says is best suited for this purpose and therefore she draws us into her novel with this invitation: “It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*. (*ibid*, p xv)”

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### 3.5 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

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The novel is structured as a homodiegetic narrative (in which the narrator of a dramatic work is also the protagonist or other character in the work), in this case, the narrator being Panchaali/Draupadi who tells us the story of her life and the events and people connected to it. In typical bildungsroman (a coming-of-age narrative, one that shows the psychological and moral development of the protagonist from youth to adulthood) fashion, the novel begins with the birth of the narrator and ends with her death. Within these two points, all the well-known stories and characters of the *Mahabharata* are narrated and described in Draupadi’s voice. Some stories, those in which she is not directly involved and therefore could not have known by herself, are narrated to her by other characters such as her nurse or her brother; which helps to keep the narrative and her voice credible and logical.

Each of the chapters has a one-word title that mystically yet succinctly conveys the essence of the experience recounted in it. For example, the first chapter titled “fire” describes the miraculous birth of the narrator from fire. The second chapter titled “blue” recounts how the narrator comes to terms with her dark or “blue” skin. And so on. Interestingly, the final chapter in which the narrator recounts the end of her life is also titled “fire” seeming to signify the cyclical aspect of life and death.

#### Activity 2

We hope that you have the novel alongside as you read this unit. Make a note of the chapter titles and see if they seem to suggest some kind of an association or pattern overall when seen together

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### 3.6 THE VOICE OF DRAUPADI/PANCHAALI

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Most reviews of the novel (listed under References at the end) find the narrative voice of Panchaali to be the most outstanding aspect of the novel. In this section, we will examine, with some examples, how this voice is shaped.

In a homodiegetic narration where the first-person narrator is a participant, i.e., one of the characters in the story (as in this novel), we expect to get a subjective perspective, i.e., one that is filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. In other words, we expect to see things (episodes, characters) as the narrator sees them, in her unique perspective. What, then, is the perspective we get from Draupadi, the narrator of this novel?

Before we discuss this question, we’d like you to bear in mind that Draupadi is a mythical figure that embodies many stereotypes in India. She is often spoken of as

being phenomenally beautiful, yet arrogant and hot-headed; and she is seen as the main impetus — the cause — of the war that destroys the Kauravas and many members of the Pandava family as well. Therefore she is often regarded a *kritya* — a being who is jinxed and brings doom. At the same time, she is considered a strong-willed woman, who questions her husbands' decisions, especially when she's gambled away in a game of dice, who participates on an equal footing in all their plans, and constantly goads them into avenging her humiliation. Her humiliation in the court of the Kauravas after being gambled away by her husband, the eldest Pandava, has also made her an enduring, tragic symbol of patriarchal tyranny. And finally, as the shared wife of the five Pandava brothers, she is a rather unique figure in a culture where polygamy was far more prevalent.

Therefore in a version of the *Mahabharata* retold from her perspective, we expect a re-evaluation of these popular perceptions of Draupadi. We expect to see how *she* feels about herself, her destiny, and her role in the lives of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. And Divakaruni does attempt to give a voice to this narrator as daughter, wife, queen, and purveyor of doom. The first chapter, in which Draupadi recounts her miraculous birth, is an illustrative case in point.

The birth of Draupadi is an important event — at once miraculous and grim. Miraculous because she and brother arise from a sacrificial fire as a boon from the gods in answer to their father's prayers; and grim because she is brought forth solely in order to serve as an instrument in his revenge, to bring about the destruction of the Kauravas. However, Draupadi relates the story of her birth not directly but as recounted to her by her nurse, Dhai Ma, who narrates the spectacular event thus:

“...and a spiralling, nasty-smelling black smoke it was, with voices in it. The voices said, *Here is the son you asked for. He'll bring you the vengeance you desire, but it'll break your life in two.*

...

“Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling too...

...and then the voices came again. They said, *Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her for she will change the course of history.* (Divakaruni, p 4)

And Draupadi, who is but a child at this point in the novel, says: “Change the course of history? Did they really say that?” (ibid 4)

The nurse's narration of this event remains faithful to the popularly known version of it, but by showing us Draupadi's wide-eyed, child-like excitement in response to the story, to the prospect of being a changer of history, Divakaruni scales the momentous event down to the perspective of a child. It is presented as a child would see it: exciting and exhilarating.

However, this version is undercut by Draupadi's own musings on the incident later in the chapter. She tells us something that Dhai Ma doesn't know, “what really happened when I stepped from the fire” (Divakaruni, p 6). As opposed to the nurse's celebratory, thrilling narration, Draupadi's version of the event is sober and troubled.

The orange lick of flames fell away; the air was suddenly cold. The ancient hall smelled of incense and under it an older smell: war-sweat and hatred. A gaunt, glittering man walked towards my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms — but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up and show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted. Dhri wouldn't let go of me however, nor I of him. We clung together so suddenly that my father was forced to pick us both up together.

I didn't forget that hesitation, even though in the years that followed King Drupad was careful to fulfil his fatherly duty and provide me with everything he believed a princess should have." (Divakaruni, p 6)

What do you make of her quiet and aggrieved tone in this passage, which is in stark contrast to the version narrated by the nurse? In having Draupadi share this perspective on her birth, do you think that the author successfully reads between the lines to evoke the age-old notion of daughters being an unwanted burden? (King Drupad had not asked for a daughter and yet was given Draupadi.) Do you think it is a perspective that needs to be teased out from within the dominant representations of the birth of Draupadi?

In the chapters that follow, Divakaruni fleshes out Draupadi's perception of the differential treatment meted out to her and her brother. Thus while her brother gets an education, learns warfare, statecraft, and is allowed to go out of the palace often, Draupadi is confined to the palace and is denied the knowledge her brother Dhri receives. She is however trained in the "sixty-four arts" befitting girls of her situation—dance, music, coquetry and the like. While sketching out the circumstances under which Draupadi (as indeed any other girl of her times) grew up, Draupadi's attitude towards this upbringing is also clearly etched in her own words. She tells us that she was an unconventional, rebellious girl, who would attend her brother's classes even when expressly forbidden, delighting in learning what he did, much to the consternation of her father and her brother's teachers, and even resorts to eavesdropping to listen to what he was being taught.

In these initial chapters Draupadi describes her childhood as one of loneliness and rebellion. Quite unlike girls of her own age and station, she bristles under the conventions imposed on her, and instead seeks comfort and knowledge in the company of her brother and their cousin, Krishna. Her father's palace becomes a hated symbol of her oppressive childhood – with its fortress-like appearance, gray walls, narrow windows, and meanly lit corridors. As an escape from this odious atmosphere she dreams of the palace that she promises herself she would have when she grew up, a fabulous palace, quite unlike her father's, in which she would be able to fulfil the prophecy about changing the course of history.

You might want to stop and think about whether this portrayal of Draupadi is in keeping with the popular image of her as bold, intelligent, and unlike the other women in the epic. Do you think that Divakaruni is building a narrative that fills in gaps in our knowledge of Draupadi, helping show how she developed into the feisty woman that she is known as?

Now, read the second chapter, "blue" and examine it in the light of what we have been saying so far about Draupadi's narration of her childhood. The chapter introduces another aspect of Draupadi's personality – her legendary beauty. Draupadi is a *kritya* partly because of her legendary beauty, but paradoxically she is dark-skinned like Krishna. As she says at the beginning of this chapter, "In a society that

looks down its patrician nose on anything except for milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl.” (Divakaruni 8)

How does Draupadi overcome her sense of embarrassment about her appearance?

“And often others see you as you see yourself.” Krishna advises her, and acting on this, she sheds her notion of being ugly, and it is this belief in her beauty that gives her a personality that draws people’s attention. Again, notice how Divakaruni gives Draupadi agency in defying the conventional notion of beauty — it is *her* belief in herself, *her* strong will that transforms the shy ‘ugly duckling’ into the comely beauty that bards would sing about.

Do you get a sense of Draupadi creating and shaping her own personality? While this is true to an extent, those familiar with the *Mahabharata* would also notice that Divakaruni keeps to the conventional version in showing how instrumental Krishna was in shaping Draupadi’s personality.

### Activity 3

As a final example, we’d like you to read Chapter 12, which recounts Draupadi’s *swayamvar*, a ceremony in which she chooses her husband from among many suitors who vie for her hand through an archery contest. Read particularly the crucial section detailing Draupadi’s rejection of Karna.

### Discussion

This chapter is significant because it introduces an important facet of Divakaruni’s Draupadi—her secret and unrequited passion for Karna. However, this is not entirely Divakaruni’s invention, for many versions of the *Mahabharata* do speak of this silent and scorching passion between the two. In rejecting and humiliating him at the *swayamvar*, she sets off a chain of events that will culminate in her own humiliation at the hands of Duryodhana which in turn brings about the destruction of the Kauravas. Divakaruni portrays Panchaali’s secret, unfulfilled and illicit love for Karna as her tragic flaw.

First, Draupadi gives us the popular version of this story as sung by the poets. This version is in the third person, and presents Draupadi as a haughty princess who deliberately humiliates Karna by asking him to name his father before vying for her hand in marriage.

...her gaze was that of a swordsman who sees a chink in his opponent’s armour and does not hesitate to plunge his blade there. And every man in the assembly even as he desired her, thanked his fate that it was not he who stood before her. (Divakaruni, 95)

This description presents the conventional perception of Draupadi in this crucial episode. But Divakaruni follows it up with Draupadi’s own version, narrated in her own voice, in which she says that the only reason she had asked this humiliating question was that she did not want her brother to die at the hands of Karna. “I don’t blame the bards for what they sing,” she says. “In a way things occurred just as they described it. But in another way they were completely different” (ibid). She admits that her words were ill-chosen and had destroyed any hope of winning his love.

What do you think the author achieves by these contrasting versions? The first version shows you why Draupadi is seen as an arrogant, sharp-tongued woman. By presenting another version, do you think Divakaruni is able to make a difference to

the way Draupadi is perceived? Does Divakaruni manage to portray her as a sensitive woman, guided by love rather than arrogance?

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### 3.7 MAGICAL REALISM IN THE NOVEL

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You should also examine the manner in which the magical and the realistic are woven together in the narrative. For instance, read the following paragraph, in which the nurse recounts the prayers and austerities that accompanied King Drupad's 30-day sacrificial ceremony for which he was granted Draupadi and her brother by the gods:

“Finally,” I prompted her, “it was the thirtieth day.”

“And I for one was heartily thankful. Milk and rice husk is all very well for priests and widows, but give me fish curry with green chillies and tamarind pickle any day! Besides, my throat was scraped raw from gabbling all those unpronounceable Sanskrit words. And my buttocks, I swear, they were flat as chapattis from sitting on that freezing stone floor (Divakaruni, p 3).”

The description of the mystical sacrificial ceremony is laced with comically ironic comments on what the people engaged in the ceremony actually felt. Similarly, the magical event of the children arising out of the fire is couched in a realistic idiom through the nurse's description that they emerged coughing from the smoke.

In fact magic and realism are woven together in various stories in the novel. Divakaruni is an expatriate writer, writing for a global, English-speaking audience some of whom may not have read the *Mahabharata*. For such writers magical realism is a potent tool for portraying their culture in the Western English idiom.

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### 3.8 A SHIFTED PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAHABHARATA?

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Thus far, we have been looking at how Divakaruni has scripted a voice for Panchaali, enabling her to present her version and her perception of events. Do we then, in the process, also get an altered version of the epic? Remember we said at the beginning of this unit, that the novel is a shifted perspective retelling of the *Mahabharata*. A shifted perspective retelling focusses on the motives, perceptions, and consciousness of a particular character so that we see the character in greater depth, and at the same time see the story as focalized through her. In this section we discuss whether Divakaruni has indeed achieved this.

Read chapters 13 through 18 which recount the most crucial part of Draupadi's life: her marriage to the five Pandava brothers. This is easily the most controversial aspect of her personality, one that has given her a rather dubious distinction! In most traditional versions of the epic, this incident is presented as illustrating one of the many virtues of the Pandavas: their utter devotion to their mother, so that even an unmindful statement of hers is treated with utmost respect as the gospel truth.

In Divakaruni's retelling, Draupadi voices her hurt and humiliation that Arjun should value even a careless remark by his mother more than her feelings. Even her father and brother seem, she says, more concerned about what people would think of them, and what the consequences for *them* would be of opposing the Pandava decision. But even as she fumes against a patriarchal world that cared little for her views, in the end it is Kunti who she sees as master-minding this part of her life.

“Why hadn’t Kunti laughed off the remark as a mistake?” she wonders. This apparently strange insistence on the part of Kunti, that the Pandavas honour her word, is fleshed out by Divakaruni as an all-too-familiar, almost banal, power struggle between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

#### Activity 4

At this point, we’d like you to stop and reflect on two parts of Draupadi’s narrative— one, Kunti engineering Draupadi’s marriage to all the five Pandava brothers, and the other, her father’s hesitation when he sees her step out of the sacrificial fire along with her brother. We would like you to think about how these two episodes, as Divakaruni portrays them, voice the silences in the epic to give us a woman’s perspective of events.

The traditional version tells us that Draupadi was a gift King Drupad did not ask for. What it does not tell us is how Draupadi would feel about being ‘unasked for’. Similarly, the epic tells us, indeed extolls, the Pandavas’ virtue in obeying their mother. But the subtext that Divakaruni attempts to voice is that Kunti used Draupadi as a cementing bond between her sons.

How would you interpret these attempts by Divakaruni to read between the lines and voice the unstated? Does she add to the richness and complexity of the narrative or is she reading these episodes along familiar modern-day stereotypes — the scheming mother-in-law and the male-child-besotted parent?

The Pandava brothers too turn out differently in Draupadi’s narrative, for she sees them as husbands rather than as heroes. And each one of them seems flawed in his own way. For instance, Arjun seems insensitive towards Draupadi; she describes him as jealous at having to share her with his brothers and yet blaming *her* for it rather than his own unwillingness to confront his mother or Yudhistir. And regarding Yudhistir who is conventionally seen as upright, moral and duty-bound, she has the following to say:

Slowly I realized he had a compendium of ideas (had Kunti put them there?) about what constitutes ladylike sexual behaviour and – this was a longer list- what didn’t. I could see that I’d have to dedicate significant energy to re-educating him. (Divakaruni, p 122)

#### Activity 5

Read chapter 26 in the novel, titled “sari”, which narrates the crucial episode of Draupadi’s humiliation by the Kauravas. What different perspective does Draupadi’s narrative give us of this episode?

#### Discussion

This is one of the most famous stories in the epic, and there is very little that can be done differently. Any version of the episode cannot but evoke anger and sympathy for Draupadi.

And Divakaruni faithfully retains all of this—Draupadi’s harrowing experience, her humiliation, anger (as much towards her husbands as the Kauravas) and her burning desire for revenge.

What we’d like you to reflect on is Draupadi’s description of her conflicted feelings about Karna even in such a tumultuous incident. She is too proud to ask for his help, and yet feels betrayed that he does not help her. Instead she says “I called on

pride to freeze my tears to stone. I mustered all the hatred I could find within me and focused it on Karna.” (Divakaruni, 192) It is this look of contempt that goads Karna into maliciously suggesting that she be disrobed.

In suggesting that Draupadi’s own haughtiness towards Karna had led to her humiliation, do you think that Divakaruni is reinforcing the stereotype that Draupadi contributed to her own fall from grace through her arrogance and high-handedness? You would have to read the text a little more carefully to answer this question. In every instance in the novel where Draupadi humiliates Karna, she does so because she is trying to protect someone else, her brother, or her husbands or Kunti. She does so because she cannot reveal her love for Karna. It is a secret passion that ultimately annihilates her. Therefore in Divakaruni’s *Draupadi*, this secret passion is her tragic flaw, and she pays for it. It is only in the last chapter before her death that this flaw is exorcised from her as, in an epiphanic moment she realizes that it is only Krishna who has been the true and constant love of her life.

The final chapter of the novel narrates Draupadi’s last journey into death when she has the epiphanic vision in which she sees that Krishna has always been there at crucial times in her life, that his love is the only thing with her on the brink of her death. How can we interpret her memory that Krishna was by her side in the sacrificial fire from which she arose at birth?

The *Mahabharata* is not just the story of a family feud; it also contains philosophical, spiritual reflections on the human condition and on God, encapsulated in the *Bhagvad Gita* which Krishna reveals to Arjun on the battlefield. In this last journey of the Pandavas too he is with them in their journey to another world. Krishna is ultimately the force behind the *Mahabharata*, directing the forces of good and evil. In other words, he is the beginning and the end as enunciated in the *Gita*. Divakaruni faithfully reproduces this aspect of the epic in her novel, focussing on Draupadi’s salvation through Krishna.

Draupadi is shown to realize her role in this cosmic play by Krishna in the last chapter as she recollects the sacrificial fire from which she was born and recollects that Krishna was there then too, telling her to go forth and do her duty. “Try to remember that you are the instrument and I the doer. If you can hold on to this no sin can touch you” (Divakaruni, p 357). And he is here again in the last chapter to remind her. Thus Draupadi turns out to be a player with a role in Krishna’s universe! But Divakaruni gives her her triumph too, for in the end she joins Karna in their own palace beyond the mortal world.

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### 3.9 DRAUPADI AS NARRATOR AND NARRATEE

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Thus far we have been talking about how Draupadi’s narrative voices the silences in the original epic.

A question that we must also ask is whether something has been lost out by making Draupadi the narrator. The homodiegetic narration, while giving us a more authentic and involved version (since it comes from someone who’s part of the story, and narrates it directly to us) is also a limited mode of narration. This is because homodiegetic narrators would not be able to narrate incidents not involving them. And since the *Mahabharata* is an epic with numerous subplots and innumerable characters, spanning many generations, no one character would be able to authentically narrate the entire epic without sacrificing logic and objectivity. That’s why the *Mahabharata* is often spoken of as compiled by Vyaasa to whom it was

revealed by the elephant-headed god Ganesha. [In the popular Hindi television serial based on the *Mahabharata*, the narrator was Samay (Time)].

There are obviously large sections of the story that Draupadi cannot narrate, because she is not a part of them, resulting in gaps in the narrative. But Divakaruni cleverly fills in the gaps using the device of story-telling: events and incidents which Draupadi could not have known are presented as narrated to her, by her brother Dhri, by her nurse, by Krishna or sung before her by poets. Dhri tells her the story of Karna which he in turn has heard from Krishna. Nakul and Sahadev tell her Bhishma's story. The stories of Gandhari and Kunti are related to her by Dhai Ma and by visiting poets in her father's court.

This device of story-telling achieves interesting effects. It allows the author to fill in gaps in the narrative resulting from the use of a subjective, limited narrator. This use of stories also means that Divakaruni relies rather heavily on the anchor of conventional versions of the *Mahabharata*. In fact, what comes through is a novel that is largely faithful to the epic.

Story-telling also becomes a metatextual glue, with the narrator becoming a narratee in some parts of the narrative. Draupadi tells us her story and in turn she is told stories by the characters in the story. This stands as an interesting parallel to Vyaasa, considered the original compiler of the *Mahabharata*, who is also a part of this narrative that he chronicled because he had fathered Pandu and Dhritrashtra the fathers of the Pandavas and Kauravas respectively. Story-telling in the novel mimics the nature of the *Mahabharata* itself, a story or a collection of stories that have been handed down orally over the ages, by different narrators.

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### 3.10 DIVAKARUNI'S DRAUPADI: A RECAST DRAUPADI?

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Given that the *Mahabharata* is one of the largest books in the world, Divakaruni's novel is no mean feat of abridgement. Taking a story that is essentially about two warring patriarchal dynasties, she cuts it down to size by bringing the women in the story to the forefront, thus engineering a feminist retelling of the epic.

However, we also need to think about the kind of Draupadi we see in this novel. Is she significantly different from the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*? In the original epic, Draupadi serves as a *deus ex machina*, an instrument, playing her assigned role in bringing about the great war of Kurukshetra, the defeat of the Kauravas and the triumph of the Pandavas. In Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi narrates, first-hand, the story of how she grows up to fulfil this destiny, both struggling against and embracing it. In presenting the stories and episodes involving Draupadi, Divakaruni remains faithful to the original epic. But in Draupadi's narration of these episodes, she creates a unique voice that articulates how she feels about her destiny that boldly questions the patriarchal order that victimizes her, and frankly confesses her flaws of pride, jealousy, arrogance, stubbornness, vanity, self-absorption.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is essentially a romantic heroine. As a child she seems rebellious, railing against the conventions of her aristocratic palace life, but she is in essence a princess and a romantic princess at that. Divakaruni carefully characterizes her this way through the two great passions that rule her heart: her magical palace and her secret love for Karna. Although she hates her father's palace and its oppressive, gender-biased conventions, what she secretly craves is a palace of her own, a palace that would be clearly different from her father's. This palace

of her dreams is created for her by her five husbands, although she has considerable say in its design, and it is befittingly called the palace of illusions. She takes great care in its upkeep, is passionately attached to it, and in presiding over it she grows into the formidable queen who changes the course of history. She harbours a similar, secret and consuming passion for Karna although this remains an unfulfilled yearning, as each encounter between them is fraught with mistrust and cruelty. This story of unrequited love between Karna and Draupadi finds mention in several versions of the epic, but by foregrounding it in her novel, Divakaruni is able to give us a more human Draupadi whose humiliation is as much her own doing as the indifferent machinations of god or destiny.

Draupadi's narrative is the stuff of extraordinary life, especially for a woman in a traditional society. Her marriage to five men is singularly unusual, making her seem exotic and audacious, for the freedom to have many spouses is a privilege that has always been enjoyed by men alone. But she puts this in perspective when she says:

Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. (Divakaruni 120)

And in response to Vyaasa's decree laying down how the five brothers would share her, and the boon he grants her whereby her virginity would be restored when she moved from one brother to another in their shared conjugal life, she says:

Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women — they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Had Kunti felt the same way when she was told that the gods would be happy to impregnate her?)

If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I'd be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that I'd have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with. (ibid)

When seen through her eyes, the wantonness her marital life seems to suggest is exposed for what it is — the design and prerogative of the men in her life.

As one reviewer puts it, even without any knowledge of the *Mahabharata*, the story of Panchaali is extraordinary — growing up to live out the predictions made at her birth, marrying the five greatest heroes of her time; becoming queen of queens and the mistress of the most magical of palaces only to lose it, causing the greatest war of her time, which would leave a million women widows; and dying alone, but not really abandoned. (Lindner, 2008)

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### 3.11 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have attempted to read and interpret Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*. We have looked at it as a retelling of the *Mahabharata* that attempts to give a bold and original voice to one of the main female protagonists in the epic – Draupadi. Through adequate examples and illustrations from the text we have analysed the narrative voice of Draupadi, and her attempts to script a shifted perspective of Draupadi herself and thereby the epic in toto.

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## 3.12 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni, *The Palace of  
Illusions*

- 1) How does Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* compare with the other female characters in the novel such as Kunti, Gandhari, and Subhadra? Does Divakaruni's feminist retelling help re-envision only Draupadi, or are the other female characters also portrayed from an alternate perspective?
- 2) How does Draupadi get to see and narrate the war? Does her narration as a woman, make us see the war differently?
- 3) Sketch the character of Draupadi as portrayed in the novel. What flaws and weaknesses does she confide to the reader? What strengths does she portray? Support your answer with textual illustrations.
- 4) How are the male protagonists in the epic viewed by Draupadi? Does her narration present an altered perspective of them? Examine any two male characters as illustration.
- 5) Compare the portrayal of Draupadi in this novel with that of any other novel. Some have been mentioned in the Introduction.

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