

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS AND LADIES' COUPE

Kaveri V A<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shivani Vashist<sup>2</sup>

(Research Scholar) Department of English Sikkim Professional University, Gangtok, (Sikkim)

(Research Supervisor) Department of English Sikkim Professional University, Gangtok, (Sikkim)

### Abstract

The quest for identity is a recurring theme in literature, delving into the multifaceted nature of individual self-discovery. This article explores the exploration of identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* two novels that offer distinct perspectives on this journey. *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi, a woman struggling to establish her identity in a patriarchal society, marked by keywords such as mythology, reimagination, and patriarchy. Meanwhile, *Ladies Coupe* presents a contemporary narrative featuring the character Akhila, whose search for identity is characterized by empowerment, independence, and society's expectations. These novels offer unique insights into the timeless struggle for selfhood, using diverse settings and protagonists to illustrate the complexities of identity formation and reformation. Readers are invited to contemplate the cultural, historical, and societal dimensions that shape an individual's quest for identity.

**Keywords:** *Quest, Identity, Struggle, Independence, Ladies Coupe, The Palace of Illusions.*

### Introduction

The exploration of identity is a fundamental theme in literature, offering insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of individual self-discovery. In this study, we delve into the examination of identity in two compelling novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions" and Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe." These literary works provide distinct and thought-provoking perspectives on the intricate journey towards self-discovery, examining the role of mythology, patriarchy, societal expectations, empowerment, and individualism in shaping characters' identities.

### Discourse

In *The Palace of Illusions* the author embarks on a journey of reimagining one of India's most revered mythological tales, the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is an epic deeply rooted in ancient Indian culture and mythology. Draupadi, the central character of the novel, is a pivotal figure in this epic, yet her character is often seen through the lens of her roles as a wife and a queen. Divakaruni's reimagining of the Mahabharata subverts this traditional perspective, providing Draupadi with her own voice and narrative. Draupadi becomes a dynamic character in her own right, and her quest for identity is a central theme. In doing so, Divakaruni challenges and reinterprets established mythology, breathing new life into the character of Draupadi. Draupadi's identity is inextricably linked to her roles as a wife to the five Pandava brothers. Her marriage, a polyandrous one, is a source of both strength and vulnerability. It is essential to recognize that her identity is initially defined by her relationship with these brothers, reflecting the societal expectations of her time. However, her quest for self-identity begins when she seeks to transcend these predefined roles and establish her identity as an individual (Puran Mal, Devendra2020). Draupadi's pursuit of self-identity is driven by her desire to be more than just a wife and queen. She yearns for recognition, respect, and autonomy. She questions the traditional norms and expectations placed upon women in her society and seeks a space where she can assert her individuality.

Draupadi's quest for identity is further complicated by her multiple roles and identities. She is a daughter, a wife, a queen, and a mother. Each of these roles demands different aspects of her character, and she must navigate the complex web of expectations associated with them. Her identity is fragmented into these various roles, and her struggle lies in reconciling and integrating them into a coherent whole. Draupadi's roles as a wife to the Pandavas

are particularly significant. While these relationships provide her with love, companionship, and support, they also constrain her individual identity. She grapples with the question of whether she is truly an equal partner in these marriages or if she is defined solely by her role as a wife. Her identity as a mother brings another layer of complexity. Her deep maternal love for her children adds to the intricate web of her identity, as she must balance her roles as a mother and a queen, often making difficult choices that affect her family (Anjali). Her quest for identity is a constant struggle to reconcile these multiple roles while asserting her individuality. Her journey is a testament to the complexity of identity in a society where gender, marriage, and societal norms play a defining role.

Empowerment in the novel '*Ladies Coupe*' is a key keyword in Akhila's quest for identity. The novel portrays her as a woman who has spent her life taking care of her family and conforming to the roles expected of her. However, as she reaches middle age and her family pressures her to marry, Akhila embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Her pursuit for identity involves breaking free from the societal mold that has been imposed on her. She takes a bold step by embarking on a solo journey to Kanyakumari in the titular ladies coupe of a train (Raja, and B. Silviya). This journey is a metaphorical and literal escape from the confines of her family, and it symbolizes her desire to reclaim her independence. Throughout her journey, Akhila meets a diverse group of women who share their life stories and struggles. These encounters serve as a catalyst for her self-discovery and contribute to her understanding of the diverse facets of womanhood and identity. Akhila's interactions with these women inspire her to question her own life choices and societal expectations. Akhila's pursuit of independence and self-identity is underscored by her determination to live life on her own terms. She explores her own desires and ambitions, which were suppressed for years under the weight of family responsibilities. Her journey exemplifies the idea that it is never too late to seek one's true self and challenge societal norms that restrict personal growth (Funda 2011).

### Comparative Analysis

While *The Palace of Illusions* and *Ladies Coupe* are set in distinct contexts and eras, they both share the central theme of a quest for identity. The protagonists, Draupadi and Akhila, represent different facets of the female experience in India and provide contrasting perspectives on identity. Draupadi's quest for identity is deeply rooted in mythology and patriarchy. Her struggle to break free from the predefined roles of wife and queen and her defiance of societal norms exemplify the challenges faced by women in ancient India. Her identity is shaped by her roles and the constraints of her time, and her journey is a battle against patriarchy and the gender dynamics of her era. In contrast, Akhila's quest for identity unfolds in a modern, urban setting. Her struggle is influenced by societal expectations, family pressure, and the intersection of gender and class. Her journey represents the evolving roles and challenges faced by women in contemporary India. Her quest for identity is marked by empowerment and the pursuit of independence, as she seeks to break free from the constraints of traditional norms and societal expectations. While Draupadi's identity is intertwined with her roles as a wife and queen, Akhila's identity is a more fluid and individualistic concept. Draupadi's transformation is a reclamation of her individuality within the constraints of her time, while Akhila's transformation is a journey of self-discovery and empowerment in a more liberalized society.

Both novels highlight the significance of mentors and support systems in the protagonists' quests for identity. Draupadi finds guidance and strength in her relationship with Krishna, a divine figure, while Akhila's encounters with other women during her journey play a similar role in inspiring her to challenge societal norms and discover her own desires. The intersection of class and gender is another common theme in both novels. While Draupadi's identity is primarily influenced by her gender and the patriarchy of her time, Akhila's identity is also shaped by her middle-class status. This intersection underscores how multiple aspects of one's identity can influence their quest for self-discovery.

### Conclusion

The novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *Ladies Coupe* provide profound insights into the quest for identity through the journeys of their protagonists, Draupadi and Akhila. Despite differing settings and eras, both books explore common themes of gender, societal expectations, empowerment, and the interplay of identity factors. Draupadi's timeless struggle in ancient India challenges patriarchy and traditional roles, while Akhila's modern journey contends with contemporary societal pressures, emphasizing empowerment and independence. These novels offer a powerful exploration of identity's complexity, emphasizing the ongoing, universal quest to challenge and redefine roles and expectations transcending time, culture, and norms.

## References

1. Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). *The Palace of Illusions*. Anchor.
2. Nair, A. (2002). *Ladies Coupe*. Penguin Books.
3. Nagar, Puran Mal, and Devendra Kumar Gora. "Existential Crisis of Female Protagonist in Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Ilkogretim Online* 19.4 (2020): 2802-2809.
4. Singla, Anjali. "The Palace of Illusions: Deconstructing Draupadi's Identity."
5. Immanuel, S. Garret Raja, and B. Silviya. "WOMAN IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INDIAN FICTIONS: A RADICAL FEMINIST STUDY OF SELECT NOVELS."
6. Dörschel, Funda Başak. "Female identity": rewritings of Greek and Biblical myths by contemporary women writers." (2011).