

The Palace of Illusions as a Feminist Retelling of the Mahabharata

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Abstract— This research article investigates Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* to substantiate it as a feminist retelling of Vyasa's Mahabharata. The article highlights how the novel presents divine intervention as distinct from human action, emphasizing that Draupadi, a woman, was chosen to rewrite history with righteous judgment and support a just ruler for Hastinapur. Contrary to the conventional belief that power and victory stem from weapons and physical strength, Draupadi, lacking these warlike traits, achieves success through her moral integrity and understanding of divine laws. This article also aims to illuminate the enduring significance of mythology and its relevance in contemporary India, offering readers insights into its cultural and philosophical impact.

Index Terms— Mythology, retelling, patriarchy, narrative, male-centered, epic, etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a reimagining and retelling of the epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, also known as Panchali. By shifting the narrative perspective to a female character one of the most pivotal but often sidelined figures in the epic Divakaruni crafts a feminist retelling that interrogates gender norms, societal expectations, and the roles of women in patriarchal structures. The novel reclaims Draupadi's voice, allowing her to narrate her own story, rather than being a passive subject of the epic's grand, male-dominated narrative. Through this lens, Divakaruni sheds light on themes of autonomy, identity, and resilience, while questioning the patriarchal biases inherent in traditional storytelling.

In the Mahabharata, Draupadi's character is often reduced to a symbol of honor, revenge, or strife, with little emphasis on her inner life or agency. *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines her as a complex, multifaceted individual with dreams, desires, and flaws. Divakaruni's Draupadi is not merely a victim of

circumstances but an active participant in her destiny, driven by her ambitions and frustrations. By giving her a first-person narrative voice, the novel disrupts the traditional male-dominated storytelling paradigm, allowing Draupadi to articulate her perspective on events that have historically been interpreted through a patriarchal lens.

Giving Draupadi a first-person narrative voice in the novel is a powerful literary strategy that subverts the traditional male-dominated storytelling paradigm found in many historical and mythological texts. Traditionally, Draupadi's story, like those of many women in classical epics, has been filtered through male perspectives, often reducing her to a passive symbol of virtue, vengeance, or suffering. By allowing her to narrate her own story, the novel reclaims her agency, transforming her from an object of interpretation into a subject with a voice.

This shift enables both Draupadi and Divakaruni to articulate their emotions, desires, and perspectives in a manner that challenges the dominant narratives imposed by patriarchal structures. Instead of being confined to the roles of wife, victim, or pawn in political and familial machinations, they become complex individuals capable of critiquing the societal norms and gendered expectations that shape the destiny of women.

The shift of voice disrupts the monolithic interpretations of Draupadi's character and offers a nuanced account of events, giving readers a glimpse into her internal struggles and resilience. Furthermore, the first-person narrative fosters intimacy between Draupadi and the reader, encouraging empathy and a deeper understanding of her experiences. It highlights the inequities and injustices she faces while also emphasizing her strength, agency, and autonomy. This

reimagining not only reclaims Draupadi's narrative but also serves as a broader critique of patriarchal storytelling traditions that marginalize or silence women's voices.

By centering Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni creates space for alternative interpretations of the epic and invites a re-evaluation of how history, mythology, and literature have been constructed and perpetuated. This act of re-narration aligns with feminist literary efforts to recover and amplify women's voices, offering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of cultural and historical narratives.

From her childhood in her father's palace to her marriage to the five Pandavas and her role in the Kurukshetra War, Draupadi's journey is marked by her struggle for recognition and respect. Her voice in the novel is assertive and reflective, questioning the injustices she faces and the societal norms that confine her. For instance, her resentment at being treated as a pawn in the political games of men highlights the systemic oppression women endure, even as queens or goddesses.

The Tamil Poet Bharathi's Panchali Sabatham also deals with Draupadi's resentment at being treated as a pawn in the political machinations of men is a central theme that highlights her complex emotions and resistance to patriarchal norms. Bharathi reimagines Draupadi (Panchali) not as a passive figure resigned to her fate but as a woman of immense strength and agency, deeply aware of the injustices she endures.

Bharathi's portrayal of Panchali's resentment also serves as a broader critique of the socio-political systems of the time, exposing the deep-seated gender inequalities that render women powerless in the face of male-dominated hierarchies. By giving Panchali a voice, Bharathi not only humanizes her but also elevates her to a symbol of resistance against oppression, inspiring readers to question and challenge the injustices perpetuated by traditional power dynamics. This nuanced characterization ensures that Panchali is remembered not just as a victim but as a powerful figure demanding accountability and justice in an unjust world.

A central theme of *The Palace of Illusions* is the exploration of gender and power dynamics within the patriarchal society of ancient India. Draupadi's life is shaped by the expectations and limitations placed upon her as a woman, despite her royal status. Her marriage to the five Pandavas is a prime example of how her agency is undermined. Rather than being given a choice, she is used as a tool to cement alliances and maintain unity among the brothers. This polygamous arrangement, while justified by the epic as a divine will or a matter of dharma, is deeply unsettling to Draupadi, who yearns for individual love and recognition.

Divakaruni delves into Draupadi's emotions, portraying her feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and longing for Arjuna, the husband she truly loves. These emotions humanize her, breaking away from the traditional portrayal of Draupadi as an idealized figure of virtue and duty. Through her struggles, Divakaruni critiques the patriarchal notion that women must suppress their desires and individuality for the greater good of family or society. The novel also addresses the intersection of gender and power through Draupadi's role in the Kurukshetra War. While she is often seen as the catalyst for the conflict, Divakaruni's retelling emphasizes how Draupadi's humiliation in the Kauravas court, where she is disrobed and degraded, is a reflection of the systemic misogyny that reduces women to objects of male honour. Draupadi's demand for justice and her refusal to forgive those who wronged her assert her agency and challenge the societal norms that perpetuate female subjugation.

Traditional narratives often portray Draupadi as an exemplar of womanly virtues, embodying beauty, loyalty, and sacrifice. However, *The Palace of Illusions* subverts this idealized image by presenting her as a flawed and relatable character. Draupadi's ambition, pride, and anger—qualities that are often vilified in women—are celebrated in the novel as integral aspects of her personality. She is unapologetically assertive, questioning the double standards and injustices she faces, even if it means defying societal expectations. For example, Draupadi's insistence on avenging her humiliation in the Kauravas court demonstrates her refusal to accept the passive role traditionally assigned to women in epics. While other female characters in the

Mahabharata, such as Gandhari and Kunti, are often portrayed as paragons of patience and self-sacrifice, Draupadi's fiery spirit sets her apart. Divakaruni's retelling highlights the strength and resilience required to navigate a world that constantly seeks to silence and oppress women.

Furthermore, the novel interrogates the concept of dharma, or duty, as it applies to women. Draupadi's struggles with her roles as a wife, queen, and mother underscore the unrealistic expectations placed upon women to embody perfection in every aspect of their lives. By giving voice to Draupadi's doubts and frustrations, Divakaruni challenges the notion that women must conform to rigid ideals of virtue and selflessness. By retelling the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, *The Palace of Illusions* becomes a subversive narrative that questions the authority and biases of traditional storytelling. The novel reclaims the agency of a female character who has historically been overshadowed by the male heroes of the epic. In doing so, it challenges the reader to reconsider the Mahabharata not as a monolithic text but as a dynamic story that can be reinterpreted through different lenses.

Divakaruni's feminist retelling also emphasizes the importance of women's voices in shaping historical and cultural narratives. By centering Draupadi's perspective, the novel highlights the gaps and silences in the original epic, where women's experiences are often marginalized or ignored. Draupadi's reflections on her life and the events of the Mahabharata reveal the underlying power structures that perpetuate gender inequality, inviting readers to critically engage with the text and its cultural legacy. *The Palace of Illusions* aligns with a broader trend in contemporary literature that seeks to reinterpret mythology from a feminist perspective. By giving voice to female characters who have been historically marginalized, these retellings challenge the patriarchal biases inherent in traditional myths and epics. Divakaruni's novel not only reclaims Draupadi's agency but also underscores the relevance of her story in contemporary discussions of gender and power.

The feminist retelling of the Mahabharata in *The Palace of Illusions* underscores the transformative power of women's voices in reshaping historical and

cultural narratives. By placing Draupadi at the center of the story and narrating events through her perspective, the novel illuminates the gaps and silences that exist in the original epic - a text largely dominated by male voices and concerns. In doing so, Divakaruni challenges the traditional narrative structure, which has often sidelined or overlooked the experiences, emotions, and agency of its female characters. In the original Mahabharata, Draupadi's story is told through the lens of the men around her -- her father, her husbands, and her enemies -- rendering her an instrument of political and familial strategy rather than an active agent of her own destiny. Divakaruni disrupts this narrative by giving Draupadi a first-person voice, enabling her to articulate her desires, doubts, fears, and grievances. This shift not only humanizes Draupadi but also allows her to reclaim her agency, transforming her from a symbolic figure into a fully realized character with her own perspective on the events that shape her life. By focusing on Draupadi's voice, the novel also critiques the patriarchal structures embedded in historical and cultural narratives. Draupadi's internal monologues and reflections reveal the emotional and psychological toll of being treated as a pawn in the political ambitions of men. Her perspective highlights the injustices she endures, from her forced marriage to five husbands to her humiliation in the Kauravas court during the dice game. These experiences, often narrated in passing or from a male point of view in the original epic, gain new depth and urgency when told through Draupadi's eyes.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's retelling emphasizes the broader significance of women's voices in history and literature. Draupadi's story becomes a lens through which the silences surrounding other women in the epic, such as Kunti, Gandhari, and even minor female characters, are brought into focus. The novel suggests that these silences are not accidental but are the result of systemic marginalization, and it seeks to fill these gaps by imagining a world where women's experiences and perspectives are integral to the narrative.

In this way, Divakaruni not only reclaims Draupadi's story but also invites readers to reconsider the ways in which historical and cultural narratives have been shaped by the exclusion of women's voices. The novel

becomes a feminist act of reclamation, asserting that women's perspectives are not only valid but essential to understanding the full complexity of history, culture, and human experience. By centering Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni ensures that her story is no longer confined to the margins but becomes a vital and transformative part of the epic's legacy.

Draupadi's struggles with identity, autonomy, and societal expectations resonate with the experiences of women in modern times. Her journey serves as a reminder that the fight for equality and recognition is not a new phenomenon but one that has been ongoing for centuries. By drawing parallels between Draupadi's story and contemporary feminist concerns, Divakaruni bridges the gap between mythology and modernity, making the ancient epic accessible and relevant to a new generation of readers.

The Palace of Illusions is a powerful feminist retelling of the Mahabharata that reclaims Draupadi's voice and challenges the patriarchal norms of traditional storytelling. Through her portrayal of Draupadi as a complex, multidimensional character, Divakaruni critiques the gender biases and societal expectations that have historically confined women. By centering a female perspective, the novel not only subverts the male-dominated narrative of the epic but also highlights the enduring relevance of Draupadi's story in the context of contemporary gender dynamics. In giving Draupadi the agency to tell her own story, Divakaruni celebrates the resilience, strength, and complexity of women, both in mythology and in real life. The Palace of Illusions serves as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling, reminding us of the importance of re-examining history and mythology through diverse and inclusive lenses. Ultimately, the novel reaffirms the necessity of feminist retellings in challenging traditional narratives and empowering marginalized voices.

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