

Re-Imagining the Epic Heroine: A Comparative Study of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*

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Abstract - The Mahabharata's Draupadi has long occupied a paradoxical position as both a symbol of victimhood and an emblem of agency. This paper examines two influential modern retellings of the epic from Draupadi's perspective: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*. While both novels recover Draupadi's silenced voice, they differ significantly in narrative strategy, ideological emphasis, and ethical vision. Divakaruni presents Draupadi as Panchaali, foregrounding her inner consciousness, emotional desires, and personal conflicts within a patriarchal epic framework. Ray, by contrast, frames *Yajnaseni* as a confessional letter to Krishna, portraying Draupadi as a morally reflective figure deeply engaged with questions of dharma, suffering, and social responsibility. Through a comparative analysis of narrative perspective, representation of female agency, and reinterpretation of myth and ethics, this paper argues that Divakaruni emphasizes individual subjectivity and mythic imagination, whereas Ray foregrounds injustice, collective suffering, and ethical accountability. Together, these texts demonstrate how contemporary Indian women writers reimagine epic heroines to interrogate gender, power, and duty in present-day society. Draupadi thus emerges as a dynamic cultural symbol through whom ancient myths are reconstituted to address modern gendered concerns.

Keywords: Draupadi; Myth Revision; Feminist Rewriting; *The Palace of Illusions*; *Yajnaseni*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian epics have historically functioned as cultural, moral, and social frameworks through which collective values are transmitted across generations. Among them, the *Mahabharata* stands out for its complexity, ethical ambiguity, and multiplicity of voices. Yet, despite its narrative expansiveness, the epic largely privileges male heroism and authority,

relegating women to marginal or symbolic roles. Female characters are often defined in relation to male protagonists, their inner lives subordinated to the grand narrative of dynastic conflict and moral struggle.

Draupadi occupies a particularly fraught position within this tradition. Born from fire, married to five brothers, and publicly humiliated in the Kaurava court, she is simultaneously revered and blamed, empowered and silenced. Traditional readings have often cast her either as a passive victim of destiny or as a dangerous instigator of war. Such interpretations flatten her complexity and obscure the gendered power structures that shape her experiences.

Contemporary Indian English and regional-language fiction has responded to this imbalance through feminist retellings that reclaim women's perspectives within myth. These rewritings do not merely retell the epic but interrogate its ideological assumptions. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995; trans. 1997) are among the most significant contributions to this genre. Both novels centre Draupadi's voice, yet they differ in narrative form, emotional register, and ethical orientation.

This paper undertakes a comparative study of these two texts to examine how Draupadi is reimagined as a speaking subject rather than a symbolic object. It analyses the novels across three interrelated dimensions: narrative perspective and voice, representation of female agency and subjectivity, and reinterpretation of myth, dharma, and social ethics. By doing so, the paper demonstrates how divergent narrative strategies enrich contemporary engagements with epic heroines and reflect broader debates on gender and justice in modern Indian society.

II. THE AUTHORS AND THEIR LITERARY CONTEXT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent Indian-American writer whose fiction frequently revisits Indian myths, history, and women's lived experiences through a contemporary feminist lens. Writing primarily in English and addressing a global readership, Divakaruni is known for reimagining traditional narratives by foregrounding women's emotional worlds, desire, and agency. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies her broader literary project of recovering silenced female voices within canonical texts, blending lyrical realism with mythic imagination.

Pratibha Ray, a distinguished Odia writer and Jnanpith Award recipient, occupies a significant place in Indian regional literature. Her writings are deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural realities and are marked by ethical seriousness and social commitment. *Yajnaseni*, originally written in Odia, reflects Ray's concern with dharma, social justice, and the moral suffering of women within patriarchal and caste-based structures. Unlike Divakaruni's individual-centred approach, Ray's literary vision emphasizes collective responsibility and ethical introspection, positioning Draupadi as a moral witness to systemic injustice.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present study is grounded in feminist literary criticism and myth-revision theory. Feminist critics have long argued that canonical narratives encode patriarchal values that marginalize women's experiences. Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision" underscores the political necessity of rereading inherited texts "with fresh eyes," particularly for women writers engaging with male-dominated traditions. Myth revision, as Alicia Ostriker suggests, enables writers to transform inherited stories so that women emerge as agents rather than appendages to male action.

In the Indian context, scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee and Susie Tharu have emphasized that modern retellings of epics are not acts of cultural

betrayal but modes of cultural renewal. These rewritings respond to contemporary ethical anxieties, including gender inequality, social injustice, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Devdutt Pattanaik has similarly observed that the *Mahabharata* survives precisely because it invites reinterpretation rather than closure.

Critical responses to *The Palace of Illusions* often focus on its lyrical prose, psychological depth, and emphasis on desire and identity. Divakaruni's Draupadi has been read as a modern woman negotiating autonomy within restrictive structures. Studies on *Yajnaseni*, by contrast, highlight its philosophical seriousness, engagement with dharma, and critique of caste and gender hierarchies. Ray's Draupadi is frequently interpreted as a moral witness to injustice rather than a purely rebellious figure.

While individual studies of these novels exist, sustained comparative analyses remain limited. This paper addresses that gap by placing the two texts in dialogue, thereby illuminating how different feminist strategies reshape the same epic heroine.

IV. NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND VOICE

Narrative voice plays a crucial role in shaping how Draupadi's subjectivity is constructed in both novels. Divakaruni adopts a first-person, memoir-like narration in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi, known as Panchaali, recounts her life retrospectively, from her unconventional birth to the aftermath of the Kurukshetra war. This narrative mode foregrounds emotional immediacy and psychological introspection. The epic world is filtered through Panchaali's personal memories, desires, resentments, and regrets.

This intimate voice allows Divakaruni to humanize mythic events. Panchaali reflects on her longing for love, her ambivalence toward her polyandrous marriage, and her complex relationship with Krishna. The narrative privileges inner conflict over epic spectacle, transforming legendary figures into emotionally vulnerable human beings.

In contrast, *Yajnaseni* employs a confessional epistolary form. Draupadi addresses her narrative to Krishna, recounting her life as a moral testimony rather than a personal memoir. This framing creates a reflective distance between the narrator and her experiences. Draupadi's voice is contemplative, restrained, and ethically engaged. She does not merely describe suffering but interrogates its moral meaning.

Thus, while Divakaruni's Draupadi speaks primarily to herself and the reader, Ray's Draupadi speaks to a divine interlocutor, transforming narration into ethical dialogue. The difference in narrative voice reflects divergent feminist priorities: psychological self-expression in Divakaruni and moral accountability in Ray.

V. REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AGENCY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Both novels reject the portrayal of Draupadi as a passive victim, yet they conceptualize agency in distinct ways. In *The Palace of Illusions*, agency is closely linked to emotional awareness and self-articulation. Panchaali openly acknowledges her forbidden love for Karna and her frustration with the constraints imposed by social norms. Her refusal to internalize silence becomes an act of resistance. She asserts, "I would not be silent. Silence had never brought justice to women like me." Such moments position speech and self-awareness as central to empowerment.

Divakaruni's Draupadi challenges patriarchal expectations not by rejecting relationships or duties outright but by asserting her right to emotional truth. Her anger after the dice game is framed as a justified response to systemic injustice rather than irrational female rage.

Ray's Draupadi, on the other hand, locates agency within ethical endurance. In *Yajnaseni*, suffering is not romanticized, but it is consciously borne. Draupadi repeatedly questions why dharma demands female sacrifice while excusing male failure. Yet she does not abandon the ethical framework of dharma altogether. Instead, she exposes its distortions and seeks a more just interpretation.

Her agency lies in moral resistance rather than personal rebellion. By articulating the injustice embedded in social codes, Ray's Draupadi becomes a representative voice for collective suffering, particularly that of marginalized women.

VI. REINTERPRETATION OF MYTH, DHARMA AND ETHICS

Both novels revise myth by foregrounding Draupadi's humanity, yet they diverge in their treatment of dharma and ethics. Divakaruni demystifies epic grandeur by emphasizing emotional consequences. War is depicted not as a heroic inevitability but as the tragic outcome of pride, wounded egos, and unresolved desire. Draupadi's role in precipitating conflict is contextualized within a system that denies her justice.

Ray, by contrast, engages directly with dharma as an ethical concept. *Yajnaseni* critiques how dharma is selectively applied to preserve patriarchal and caste-based power. Draupadi's dialogue with Krishna becomes a space for ethical interrogation rather than passive devotion. She questions why moral law protects the powerful while humiliating the vulnerable.

These contrasting approaches demonstrate how myth revision can operate on multiple levels: emotional realism in Divakaruni and ethical critique in Ray.

VII. DRAUPADI AND CONTEMPORARY GENDER DISCOURSE

The relevance of these retellings extends beyond literary analysis to contemporary gender discourse. Draupadi's public humiliation resonates with modern discussions on female bodily autonomy and public shaming. Her silencing mirrors the marginalization of women's voices in social and political spaces.

Divakaruni's Draupadi speaks to readers negotiating personal identity within restrictive cultural norms, while Ray's Draupadi addresses systemic injustice and moral responsibility. Together, they demonstrate that epic heroines remain powerful sites for rethinking gender, power, and ethics in contemporary India.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals that *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni* offer distinct yet complementary reimaginings of Draupadi. Divakaruni foregrounds individual subjectivity, emotional depth, and mythic imagination, whereas Ray emphasizes ethical reflection, social justice, and collective responsibility. Both narratives challenge patriarchal interpretations of the *Mahabharata* and reclaim Draupadi as a conscious, questioning woman.

By revisiting ancient myth through contemporary feminist lenses, these novels demonstrate literature's capacity to recuperate silenced voices and interrogate inherited values. Draupadi emerges not as a static epic figure but as a dynamic symbol through whom cultural identity and gendered ethics continue to be contested and reconstituted.

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