

Draupadi: A Modern Woman's Voice in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract- The *Mahabharata*, one of the most influential epics of Indian literary and cultural history, has traditionally been narrated through a predominantly male-centered perspective, privileging heroic masculinity while marginalizing female experience. Whereas Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) offers a powerful revisionist retelling of the epic by relocating the narrative authority to Draupadi, one of its most complex yet historically silenced female figures. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own life, Divakaruni foregrounds women's emotional, psychological, and ethical experiences that remain peripheral in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. Draupadi emerges not merely as a legendary queen or the cause of the Kurukshetra war, but as a self-reflective, articulate and resistant woman negotiating identity, desire, justice, and power within a rigidly patriarchal society. This paper examines how Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi as a modern woman's voice, employing feminist revisionism to challenge traditional gender hierarchies and reinterpret myth through contemporary concerns of agency, autonomy, and resistance. The study portrays that *The Palace of Illusions* transforms Draupadi from a marginal epic figure into a symbol of modern female consciousness whose voice resonates with ongoing struggles against patriarchal oppression. It also seeks to analyze how Divakaruni constructs Draupadi as a modern woman's voice—one that challenges gender inequality, asserts moral agency, and redefines identity within a male-dominated epic tradition.

Keywords: Feminism, Mythological Revisionism, Identity, Patriarchy, Female Voice, Resistance

Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* have played a crucial role in shaping cultural values, moral codes, and gender norms across centuries. These texts, revered as repositories of dharma and ethical conduct, have largely been interpreted through male-centric narratives that celebrate masculine heroism, warfare,

and lineage. Women in these epics often function as symbols, moral tests, or narrative catalysts rather than as fully developed individuals with autonomous voices. Draupadi, one of the most prominent female figures in the *Mahabharata*, exemplifies this marginalization. Despite her central role in the unfolding of the epic's events, her inner life, desires and emotional struggles remain largely unexplored in the traditional narrative.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed Indo-American writer, addresses this narrative silence through *The Palace of Illusions*. Known for blending Indian mythology with contemporary feminist perspectives, Divakaruni reclaims Draupadi's voice and positions her at the center of the narrative. Her major works include *Arranged Marriage* (1995), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), and *before We Visit the Goddess* (2016)—frequently explore themes of female identity, displacement, and resistance. *The Palace of Illusions* stands out for its bold reimagining of an epic narrative through a distinctly female consciousness.

Rather than offering a mere retelling of the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni's novel functions as a feminist revisionist text. It interrogates the patriarchal structures embedded in mythological storytelling and exposes the emotional and ethical costs borne by women. Draupadi's

narration allows readers to witness the epic's events from within the lived experience of a woman who is simultaneously revered, desired, feared and controlled.

Feminist revisionism involves reinterpreting canonical texts to uncover suppressed voices and challenge dominant ideologies. In the context of mythological narratives, such revisionism becomes

particularly significant, as myths often function as cultural blueprints that naturalize gender hierarchies. By rewriting myths from female perspectives, contemporary women writers contest the authority of patriarchal storytelling and reclaim narrative space for women. *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies this feminist project.

Divakaruni does not reject the *Mahabharata*; instead, she enters into a critical dialogue with it. The novel retains the epic's key events but transforms their meaning by filtering them through Draupadi's consciousness. This narrative strategy destabilizes traditional interpretations and compels readers to question the moral assumptions underlying epic heroism, dharma, and honor.

Through Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni exposes the gendered nature of dharma itself.

Actions celebrated as righteous when performed by men—such as war, gambling, or political manipulation—become ethically questionable when their consequences for women are foregrounded. Thus, feminist revisionism in the novel not only restores female voice but also critiques the moral framework of the epic tradition.

Draupadi's marginalization begins at birth. Born from sacrificial fire to King Drupada, she is accompanied by a prophecy that predetermines her future: "*You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it. You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the deaths of evil kings _ and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history. You will be loved. Though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end -and yet not so (39)*" This prophecy establishes Draupadi as a symbolic figure rather than an autonomous individual. Her father's disappointment at her birth—stemming from his desire for a male heir—further reinforces her secondary status within a patriarchal lineage system.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is acutely aware of this imposed destiny. She recognizes that her life is scripted by forces beyond her control, yet she

continuously resists complete submission to this script. Her internal conflict reflects Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" Draupadi is shaped into womanhood through social conditioning, denial of choice and constant surveillance, yet she actively negotiates these constraints.

Denied formal education afforded to her brother, Draupadi secretly acquires knowledge of politics, warfare, and scripture. This act of self-education symbolizes intellectual resistance and challenges the assumption that knowledge and power belong exclusively to men.

Through this portrayal, Divakaruni critiques historical and cultural practices that deny women access to learning and decision-making, regardless of their social status.

The episode of Draupadi's swayamvara reveals the illusory nature of female choice within patriarchal institutions. Although presented as a ceremony allowing the bride to choose her husband, the event is orchestrated to secure Arjuna as a political ally for King Drupada. She described herself as "*I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of the fishing pole*" (57). Draupadi's personal desires are rendered irrelevant, and she becomes a means to male ambition. Her unspoken attraction to Karna further complicates her emotional landscape, highlighting the tension between individual desire and social obligation.

Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas—decided without her consent—marks a profound loss of agency. Even figures traditionally regarded as virtuous, such as Kunti and Yudhishtira, participate in this objectification by prioritizing patriarchal unity over

Draupadi's autonomy. Through these episodes, Divakaruni exposes how women are often sacrificed for familial and political stability.

Despite her royal status, Draupadi remains bound by restrictive norms that limit her freedom and emotional fulfillment. Her experiences underscore the paradox of power and powerlessness faced by women who occupy symbolic positions of honor while lacking real authority over their own lives.

The dice game in the Kaurava court constitutes the most traumatic episode in Draupadi's life and serves as the moral fulcrum of the novel. Yudhishtira's decision to wager Draupadi after losing his kingdom and brothers exposes the deeply ingrained belief that

a wife is the property of her husband. Draupadi's public humiliation—being dragged into the court and threatened with disrobing—reveals the brutal consequences of patriarchal entitlement.

Equally significant is the silence of the elders—Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, and Dhritarashtra—whose inaction reflects institutional complicity in female oppression. Their adherence to rigid interpretations of dharma renders them incapable of defending justice when it matters most. Draupadi's questioning of their authority destabilizes the moral legitimacy of the epic's patriarchal order.

Her refusal to accept victimhood marks a decisive assertion of agency. Draupadi's verbal resistance transforms her from a passive sufferer into a moral challenger who exposes the contradictions within patriarchal law. Her curse against the Kauravas where she says that *"All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's deeds. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I have wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman"* (194). This symbolizes accumulated female rage and functions as a narrative counterforce to masculine violence.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi is notable for its emotional depth and complexity. Her unresolved attraction to Karna introduces a dimension of forbidden desire that complicates conventional moral judgments. Karna, often celebrated as a tragic hero, is revealed as deeply flawed in his treatment of Draupadi. His public condemnation of her during the dice game underscores how wounded male pride can manifest as misogynistic cruelty.

By acknowledging Draupadi's desire and regret, Divakaruni humanizes her protagonist and resists idealized representations of womanhood. Draupadi's emotional conflicts—her resentment toward her husbands, her ambivalence towards Kunti and her lingering attachment to Karna—present her as a fully realized individual rather than a symbolic archetype. Thus Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* represents a significant intervention in mythological and feminist literature. By reclaiming Draupadi's voice, the novel challenges the patriarchal assumptions embedded within the *Mahabharata* and redefines epic storytelling through female consciousness. Draupadi

emerges as a modern woman's voice— assertive, introspective, and resistant—who confronts injustice and articulates moral agency within oppressive structures. Rather than reducing her to a catalyst for war, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a complex individual navigating identity, desire, suffering and responsibility. Her life resonates with contemporary struggles against gender inequality and marginalization, affirming the enduring relevance of feminist revisionism.

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