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Draupadi as a Mythological Icon: A Feminist Re-vision in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a powerful feminist re-vision of the Mahabharata by narrating the epic through the voice of Draupadi. This paper examines how Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi as a mythological icon who challenges patriarchal interpretations of destiny, dharma, and female virtue. By applying feminist critical perspectives to mythological logic, the study highlights how the novel dismantles traditional representations of women as passive sufferers and redefines them as conscious agents of resistance and selfhood. The analysis focuses on key episodes such as Draupadi's polyandrous marriage, her humiliation in the Kaurava court, and her suppressed emotional life to reveal the systemic marginalization of women within epic traditions. Through this re-visioning, Divakaruni not only reclaims Draupadi's silenced voice but also transforms mythology into a dynamic space for gender justice. The paper argues that *The Palace of Illusions* bridges ancient narrative and contemporary feminist discourse, presenting Draupadi as a timeless symbol of female strength, autonomy, and moral courage.

Keywords: Draupadi, Feminist Re-vision, Mythological Logic, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Rewriting Myth, Gender and Power.

Introduction

Indian mythology, particularly the vast narrative universe of the *Mahabharata*, has historically privileged male heroism, dynastic conflict, and the politics of dharma. Women within these narratives frequently function as catalysts for male action, embodiments of virtue, or symbols of sacrifice rather than as autonomous subjects. Among these female figures, Draupadi occupies a uniquely paradoxical position. She is at once revered as a goddess-like presence and remembered primarily through episodes of humiliation, polyandry, and war. Although central to the unfolding of the epic's climactic conflict, her interiority remains largely unexplored in traditional narratives.

In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Divakaruni reimagines the epic from Draupadi's first-person perspective, transforming a mythological character into a modern feminist consciousness. Through this narrative shift, Divakaruni not only revisits the epic but reinterprets its ideological foundations. Drawing upon Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision"—defined as the act of looking back at old texts with fresh, critical eyes (Rich 18)—Divakaruni interrogates the patriarchal logic embedded in mythological discourse. This paper argues that Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi as a mythological icon of resistance and agency by challenging the epic's assumptions about destiny, dharma, marriage, female virtue, and silence. Through close textual analysis and feminist theoretical

engagement, this study demonstrates how *The Palace of Illusions* transforms myth into a space of gendered critique and cultural renewal.

Adrienne Rich, in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," asserts that re-reading canonical texts is essential for women seeking to challenge cultural silences (Rich 18). Re-vision is not mere reinterpretation; it is an act of survival and reclamation. Divakaruni's novel embodies this principle by relocating narrative authority from male sages to Draupadi herself.

In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's suffering is framed within the logic of fate and dharma. Her polyandrous marriage, exile, and humiliation are justified as part of divine destiny. Divakaruni dismantles this mythological determinism by foregrounding Draupadi's questions and emotional responses. Rather than accepting suffering as sacred duty, she interrogates its moral basis: "Why is a woman's life always decided by men's vows?" (Divakaruni 85).

This shift from passive endurance to critical inquiry destabilizes patriarchal myth-making. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", marginalized voices are often mediated or silenced within dominant discourse (Spivak 271). Draupadi, in traditional epic narration, exemplifies this silencing. Divakaruni's retelling allows her to speak as subject rather than object, thus enacting a literary recovery of subaltern female agency.

Draupadi's miraculous birth from the sacrificial fire marks her as extraordinary within epic cosmology. In traditional narratives, this event symbolizes divine intervention and political destiny. However, Divakaruni reframes the symbolism of fire as a metaphor for suppressed female power. Draupadi reflects, "I was born of fire, but I was expected to live in ashes" (Divakaruni 102).

This metaphor encapsulates the central tension of her existence: elemental strength constrained by social expectations. Though born for greatness, she is groomed to fulfill her father Drupada's political ambitions. Her beauty becomes both an asset and a burden, attracting admiration while reducing her to an object of exchange.

Alf Hildebeitel's anthropological study *The Cult of Draupadi* notes that Draupadi is worshipped in certain regional traditions as a powerful goddess (Hildebeitel 1). Yet within the canonical epic, her agency remains limited. Divakaruni bridges this contradiction by restoring psychological depth to her mythic stature. Fire, in this reinterpretation, becomes not only a symbol of destiny but also of resilience and suppressed rebellion.

One of the most controversial aspects of Draupadi's narrative is her marriage to the five Pandava brothers. The epic justifies this arrangement through Kunti's accidental command and divine sanction. However, Divakaruni foregrounds Draupadi's emotional turmoil and lack of consent. Though celebrated as queen of Indraprastha, Draupadi experiences fragmentation of identity. She becomes a shared possession rather than an autonomous partner. "I had husbands, but I had no home" (Divakaruni 134). This confession reveals the emotional displacement masked by royal grandeur.

From a feminist perspective, the institution of marriage in the epic prioritizes male unity over female individuality. Draupadi's polyandry preserves fraternal harmony while dissolving her singular marital bond. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita observe that women in classical Indian literature are often "bearers of family honor" rather than independent agents (Tharu and Lalita 45). Divakaruni exposes this structural imbalance by emphasizing Draupadi's inner conflict. The palace itself—constructed by Maya and filled with illusions—becomes symbolic of her condition. It represents external splendor concealing internal instability. Through this metaphor, Divakaruni critiques the patriarchal glorification of sacrifice disguised as divine will.

The disrobing of Draupadi in the Kaurava court stands as one of the most traumatic episodes in the *Mahabharata*. Traditionally interpreted as a test of chastity and divine grace, the scene highlights Krishna's miraculous intervention. Divakaruni, however, shifts the focus from miracle to moral failure.

The silence of Bhishma, Drona, and other elders underscores systemic complicity.

Patriarchy operates not only through overt violence but also through passive endorsement. Draupadi's humiliation becomes a revelation of institutional injustice. She observes, "In that court, I learned that justice has no voice when a woman is on trial" (Divakaruni 198).

Shailaja Kamble argues that Divakaruni's retelling transforms Draupadi from victim to moral commentator (Kamble 147). By articulating her outrage, Draupadi exposes the fragility of male-defined dharma. The event becomes a turning point not merely in the epic's plot but in her political consciousness. Rather than depicting her solely as a rescued woman, Divakaruni presents her as a catalyst for historical reckoning. Her vow for justice propels the narrative toward war, emphasizing her role as an active agent rather than passive sufferer.

Divakaruni further radicalizes Draupadi's characterization by exploring her suppressed attraction to Karna. Traditional mythology often denies female characters emotional ambiguity. By granting Draupadi desire beyond socially sanctioned bonds, Divakaruni humanizes her. Sushma Singh notes that this portrayal shifts Draupadi from symbolic ideal to psychologically

complex individual (Singh 235). Her longing for Karna represents the tension between personal desire and imposed duty. It reflects the broader feminist struggle between societal expectation and individual autonomy. This emotional dimension challenges the myth of the "ideal woman" as devoid of personal longing. Draupadi's interior conflict underscores her humanity and destabilizes patriarchal prescriptions of virtue. The novel also foregrounds relationships among women—Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra—revealing varied strategies of negotiating patriarchy. Kunti embodies endurance; Gandhari represents blind loyalty; Draupadi articulates defiance. Their interactions highlight generational shifts in female consciousness.

While solidarity is imperfect, shared suffering creates implicit bonds. Divakaruni thereby expands the narrative focus beyond male heroism to female experience.

Draupadi emerges not as an isolated heroine but as part of a continuum of women navigating systemic oppression. By retelling the *Mahabharata* for a twenty-first-century audience, Divakaruni situates Draupadi within modern feminist discourse. Issues of bodily autonomy, consent, public shaming, and voice resonate with contemporary gender debates. The palace of illusions becomes symbolic of societal structures that mask inequality under grandeur.

Myth, therefore, becomes dynamic rather than static. As Rich contends, revisiting tradition enables cultural transformation (Rich 23). Divakaruni's re-vision does not dismantle mythology; it revitalizes it. Draupadi becomes a timeless icon—rooted in antiquity yet reflective of modern feminist consciousness.

Through *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reclaims Draupadi from the margins of epic narration and positions her at the center of mythological discourse. By applying feminist re-vision, she transforms Draupadi into an icon of resistance, introspection, and moral courage. No longer confined to roles imposed by fathers, husbands, or destiny, Draupadi asserts interpretive authority over her story. Her voice challenges patriarchal interpretations of dharma and redefines myth as a site of ethical inquiry. Divakaruni's novel demonstrates that revisiting canonical texts is not an act of destruction but of renewal. By restoring agency to a silenced heroine, she reshapes cultural memory and affirms the enduring relevance of feminist reinterpretation. Draupadi's fire—once contained within epic tradition—now illuminates pathways toward justice, equality, and selfhood.

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