



## REIMAGINING DRAUPADI: FEMINIST REVISION AND FEMALE AGENCY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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### **Abstract:**

Mythological retellings have emerged as a significant literary trend in contemporary Indian English literature, offering new perspectives on traditional narratives by foregrounding voices that have long remained marginalized. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) revisits the Mahabharata through the first-person narration of Draupadi, transforming her from an object of patriarchal discourse into an articulate subject who questions the structures governing her existence. This article examines how Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi's identity through feminist revisionist mythology, emphasizing her agency, selfhood, emotional complexity, and resistance to patriarchal norms. Rather than portraying Draupadi solely as the catalyst of the Kurukshetra war, the novel presents her as an intellectual, politically aware, and emotionally resilient woman negotiating power within restrictive social institutions. The study argues that Divakaruni challenges the conventional epic tradition by recovering the silenced female perspective and exposing the gendered mechanisms embedded in mythological narratives. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism and theories of myth revision, the article explores themes such as female autonomy, identity formation, voice, desire, and resistance. It further demonstrates that *The Palace of Illusions* bridges the gap between ancient mythology and contemporary feminist discourse, encouraging readers to reinterpret inherited cultural narratives from a gender-conscious perspective. Divakaruni's reimagining of Draupadi affirms that myth is not a static cultural artifact but a dynamic space where marginalized voices can reclaim history, negotiate identity, and redefine the meanings of power, justice, and womanhood in both historical and modern contexts.

**Key Words:** Feminist Revision, Draupadi, Mythological Retelling, Female Agency, Identity

Myths have historically functioned as powerful cultural narratives that preserve collective memory, shape moral values, and define social identities. Across civilizations, they have served not merely as stories of divine intervention and heroic achievements but also as ideological frameworks that influence gender roles, power relations, and cultural traditions. In the Indian context, the Mahabharata occupies a unique position as one of the foundational epics that continues to shape religious, philosophical, and social consciousness. However, like many classical texts, the epic is predominantly narrated from masculine perspectives, often limiting women to symbolic roles while suppressing their individual experiences and voices. Contemporary writers have therefore revisited these narratives to recover the perspectives of women who were historically marginalized within the epic tradition.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a distinctive position for her feminist reinterpretation of Indian mythology. Her novel retells the Mahabharata through the voice of Draupadi, allowing one of the epic's most misunderstood women to narrate her own life. Instead of presenting Draupadi merely as the wife of the five Pandavas or the cause of the Kurukshetra war, Divakaruni reconstructs her as a reflective, intelligent, emotionally complex, and politically conscious individual. Through this narrative strategy, the novel questions patriarchal assumptions embedded within traditional versions of the epic and offers readers an alternative understanding of myth from a woman's perspective.

The significance of *The Palace of Illusions* lies in its ability to humanize Draupadi beyond her legendary status. The novel foregrounds her aspirations, insecurities, desires, disappointments, and intellectual struggles, thereby presenting her as a multidimensional individual rather than a mythological symbol. Her voice challenges the authority of patriarchal institutions such as marriage, kingship, and familial obligation, while simultaneously negotiating the emotional complexities of love, duty, revenge, and justice. This reinterpretation enables readers to recognize how silence itself becomes a political instrument within traditional narratives and how storytelling can reclaim agency for historically excluded voices.

One of the most remarkable achievements of her is the transformation of Draupadi from a legendary figure into a self-conscious narrator who interprets her own life. In the traditional Mahabharata, Draupadi is often represented through the perspectives of male characters, and her identity is largely defined by her relationships with her father, husbands, and political rivals. Although she occupies a central place in the epic, her thoughts, emotions, and aspirations remain largely unexplored. Divakaruni challenges this narrative limitation by allowing Draupadi to tell her own story, thereby shifting the focus from patriarchal history to female experience.

From the opening chapters, Draupadi refuses to accept the identity imposed upon her by society. Born from the sacrificial fire, she is immediately burdened with expectations concerning destiny, revenge, and political power. Rather than celebrating her extraordinary birth as a divine blessing, the novel portrays it as the beginning of a life governed by obligations that leave little room for personal choice. This reinterpretation humanizes Draupadi by presenting her as an individual struggling to reconcile her desires with societal expectations.

The narrative also redefines Draupadi's emotional life. Rather than portraying her as an idealized symbol of virtue, Divakaruni presents her as a woman capable of love, jealousy, anger, ambition, regret, and compassion. Her emotional complexity challenges patriarchal expectations that women should embody self-sacrifice without expressing personal desires. By acknowledging these inner conflicts, the novel presents Draupadi as a psychologically realistic individual whose humanity transcends mythological idealization.

The first-person narration also encourages readers to question the reliability of canonical myths. Instead of accepting the epic as an unquestionable historical truth, Divakaruni demonstrates that every narrative is shaped by the perspective of its storyteller. Draupadi's account reveals the emotional and psychological dimensions omitted from traditional versions of the Mahabharata, thereby illustrating that history and mythology are open to reinterpretation. The narrative strategy aligns with Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision," which emphasizes revisiting established texts from women's perspectives to expose hidden assumptions and recover suppressed voices (Rich 18).

A central concern of *The Palace of Illusions* is the examination of patriarchy and its influence on women's lives. While the Mahabharata is traditionally celebrated for its heroic ideals and moral dilemmas, it also reflects a deeply patriarchal social order in which women's identities are determined by male authority. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits this structure by portraying Draupadi as a woman who consistently negotiates, questions, and resists patriarchal expectations. Although she cannot entirely escape the limitations imposed upon her, her persistent assertion of individuality transforms her into a symbol of female agency.

From her birth, Draupadi's life is controlled by forces beyond her choice. She is born not as an ordinary child but from the sacrificial fire with a predetermined destiny linked to political revenge and dynastic conflict. Her existence is therefore shaped by the ambitions of men rather than by her own aspirations. Divakaruni emphasizes that Draupadi recognizes this lack of autonomy and repeatedly questions why her future has been decided before she has the opportunity to define herself. The awareness distinguishes the novel from the traditional epic, where such internal conflicts receive little attention.

Marriage becomes another significant site of patriarchal control. Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers is not the result of her personal choice but of Kunti's command and social obligation. Divakaruni portrays this episode as emotionally devastating, highlighting Draupadi's confusion, disappointment, and suppressed resistance. "Divakaruni within the plot of *The Palace of Illusions* exhibits her specific concern for those female characters who were subjected to torture and neglect in Mahabharata. The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large" (Agarwal 67). Instead of accepting the arrangement unquestioningly, she reflects upon its injustice and the unequal expectations imposed upon women. Her internal protest reveals the gendered nature of social customs that privilege male authority over female consent.

The infamous dice-game episode further exposes the violence embedded within patriarchal institutions. Draupadi is treated as property that can be wagered and lost, demonstrating how women are denied independent legal and social identities. Divakaruni's retelling intensifies the emotional impact of this humiliation by narrating the event through Draupadi's own perspective. Her refusal to remain silent and her public questioning of the elders in the royal court become powerful acts of resistance. Rather than accepting victimhood, she demands justice and exposes the moral failure of those who remain passive.

Her courageous interrogation of the assembly challenges the legitimacy of patriarchal authority and transforms silence into political defiance. Draupadi's narrative directly contests this condition by asserting her right to interpret her own experiences. Judith Butler argues that gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through repeated cultural practices rather than biological destiny (Butler 45). Divakaruni's Draupadi repeatedly questions these prescribed roles, revealing that femininity is neither fixed nor naturally submissive.

Another dimension of Draupadi's agency lies in her political awareness. Unlike the conventional portrayal of women as passive observers of state affairs, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as an active participant in political discussions. She understands diplomacy, recognizes the consequences of war, and advises the Pandavas during moments of crisis. Although her counsel is not always accepted, her intellectual engagement challenges the assumption that political authority belongs exclusively to men.

The novel also portrays agency as a gradual process rather than an absolute achievement. Draupadi does not overthrow patriarchal institutions, nor does she achieve complete freedom from social constraints. Instead, her agency emerges through everyday acts of questioning, remembering, speaking, and refusing to surrender her individuality. Her resilience demonstrates that resistance often exists within oppressive systems rather than entirely outside them. This nuanced portrayal reflects contemporary feminist thought, which recognizes that women's empowerment frequently involves negotiating structures of power instead of simply rejecting them.

Through these narrative strategies, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a feminist icon whose strength lies not only in extraordinary courage but also in her unwavering determination to preserve her identity. *The Palace of Illusions* therefore critiques patriarchal traditions while simultaneously celebrating the capacity of women to reclaim agency through voice, memory, and self-definition. By foregrounding Draupadi's perspective, the novel encourages readers to reconsider the gender politics embedded within mythological narratives and to recognize the enduring relevance of feminist reinterpretations in contemporary literature.

The search for identity constitutes one of the central themes in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Unlike the traditional Mahabharata, where Draupadi is primarily remembered as the wife of the five Pandavas and the queen of Indraprastha, Divakaruni presents her as an individual striving to discover her own identity beyond socially imposed roles. Throughout the novel, Draupadi's journey is marked by continuous self-reflection, emotional conflict, and an unyielding desire to define herself on her own terms. By foregrounding her inner life, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi from a mythological symbol into a modern woman negotiating questions of identity, desire, and personal freedom.

From childhood, Draupadi demonstrates an awareness that her life is being shaped by others. Her father views her as an instrument of political revenge, while society expects her to embody the ideals of feminine beauty, obedience, and sacrifice. These expectations create an internal struggle between the identity imposed upon her and the identity she wishes to construct for herself. Rather than accepting these roles unquestioningly, Draupadi repeatedly reflects on her aspirations, fears, and disappointments.

This introspective narrative allows readers to witness the formation of her selfhood as an evolving and dynamic process rather than a predetermined destiny.

A significant aspect of Draupadi's identity is her intellectual independence. She seeks knowledge, questions traditions, and refuses to accept customs merely because they have been sanctioned by society. Her curiosity distinguishes her from conventional representations of women in classical mythology, where intellectual authority is generally reserved for male characters. Divakaruni portrays knowledge as a source of empowerment, suggesting that education and critical thinking enable women to challenge patriarchal ideologies. Draupadi's reflections on politics, morality, justice, and human relationships reveal a consciousness that extends far beyond the domestic sphere.

The novel also explores female desire with remarkable sensitivity. One of its most debated aspects is Draupadi's emotional attraction toward Karna. In the canonical Mahabharata, this possibility remains largely absent or only indirectly suggested. Divakaruni imaginatively develops this emotional conflict to reveal Draupadi's suppressed desires and emotional vulnerability. Her attraction to Karna is not merely romantic; it symbolizes her longing for a life shaped by personal choice rather than political obligation. By presenting these emotions without moral condemnation, the novel challenges the patriarchal expectation that women must suppress their desires in the interest of social duty.

The portrayal of desire humanizes Draupadi by acknowledging that women possess emotional complexity equal to that of men. Instead of depicting her as an idealized figure of perfect virtue, Divakaruni presents her as a woman who experiences love, regret, longing, jealousy, and uncertainty. "In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him for that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl to a young woman, I didn't trust him completely" (Divakaruni 6). Such psychological realism dismantles the traditional binary that categorizes women as either virtuous or transgressive. Draupadi's emotional conflicts become an essential part of her search for identity, demonstrating that selfhood is shaped by both inner desires and external constraints.

The construction of Draupadi's identity also reflects broader feminist concerns regarding subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are often denied the opportunity to exist as autonomous subjects because patriarchal societies define them through their relationships with men (Beauvoir 26). Divakaruni directly challenges this framework by allowing Draupadi to narrate her own experiences. Through first-person narration, Draupadi becomes the subject rather than the object of history, reclaiming the authority to interpret her life, emotions, and decisions. Her narrative voice itself becomes an act of resistance against the silencing of women within traditional literary discourse.

The novel suggests that identity is never fixed but continually negotiated. Draupadi's roles as daughter, wife, queen, mother, exile, and survivor constantly reshape her understanding of herself. Each experience contributes to her emotional and intellectual growth, enabling her to question the values that govern her society. Even during moments of suffering and loss, she refuses to surrender her individuality. Her resilience illustrates that identity emerges through continuous negotiation between personal aspirations and social expectations.

One of the defining features of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is its exploration of the relationship between power, silence, and resistance. Throughout history, patriarchal societies have often maintained authority by controlling women's voices and limiting their participation in public discourse. In the traditional Mahabharata, Draupadi is remembered primarily through the actions and interpretations of male characters, while her inner thoughts and emotional responses remain largely absent. Divakaruni challenges this narrative imbalance by allowing Draupadi to become the narrator of her own life. Through this narrative strategy, silence is transformed into speech, and marginalization becomes a site of resistance.

The novel demonstrates that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a cultural mechanism through which patriarchal societies regulate women's identities. Draupadi is repeatedly expected to remain obedient, accept decisions made by men, and sacrifice her personal desires for family and political interests. "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine" (120). Whether in matters of marriage, kingship, or exile, her opinions are frequently ignored despite her intelligence and political insight. Divakaruni presents these moments not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of a broader patriarchal system that privileges masculine authority while minimizing female participation.

The royal court scene following the dice game represents the most significant example of this unequal distribution of power. After being staked and lost by Yudhishtira, Draupadi is dragged into the assembly and publicly humiliated before kings, elders, and warriors. While many influential men witness her suffering, few intervene to defend her dignity. Divakaruni intensifies this episode by emphasizing Draupadi's courage in questioning the legality and morality of the proceedings. Rather than accepting humiliation in silence, she asks whether a man who has already lost himself possesses the right to gamble away another human being. This question exposes the ethical contradictions of patriarchal law and transforms Draupadi's voice into an instrument of moral resistance.

The significance of this resistance extends beyond individual courage. Draupadi's refusal to remain silent disrupts the authority of institutions that claim legitimacy while perpetuating injustice. Her words force the royal assembly to confront its own moral failure, demonstrating that speech itself can become an act of political defiance. Divakaruni therefore portrays language as a form of empowerment through which marginalized individuals challenge oppressive structures and reclaim their humanity.

The representation resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential argument that marginalized groups are frequently denied the opportunity to represent themselves within dominant systems of knowledge. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak argues that the voices of oppressed individuals are often filtered through institutions that prevent genuine self-representation (Spivak 271). Divakaruni's novel responds to this concern by allowing Draupadi to narrate her own experiences rather than allowing others to define her identity. Consequently, the novel functions as an act of literary recovery that restores agency to a woman historically confined within patriarchal narration.

Memory also becomes a powerful form of resistance in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi repeatedly revisits moments of joy, betrayal, exile, and loss, interpreting them according to her own understanding rather than accepting official historical versions. Through memory, she reconstructs both her identity and the history of the Mahabharata. Divakaruni suggests that

storytelling itself possesses transformative power because it enables marginalized individuals to preserve experiences that dominant narratives often erase or distort.

Another important aspect of resistance is Draupadi's refusal to internalize patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Although she fulfills many social responsibilities as daughter, wife, queen, and mother, she consistently questions the assumptions underlying these roles. She refuses to believe that female virtue requires complete obedience or emotional silence. Instead, she demonstrates that dignity arises from self-respect, moral courage, and intellectual independence. Her resistance is therefore both personal and political, challenging not only individual acts of injustice but also the cultural values that sustain gender inequality.

Divakaruni avoids portraying resistance as simple rebellion. Draupadi's struggle is marked by emotional pain, compromise, and vulnerability. She experiences moments of regret, loneliness, and uncertainty, revealing that resistance often involves psychological endurance rather than spectacular acts of heroism. This nuanced portrayal reflects contemporary feminist perspectives that recognize empowerment as a gradual and complex process shaped by historical, cultural, and emotional circumstances.

*The Palace of Illusions* presents power not as an exclusively masculine privilege but as something that can be reclaimed through voice, memory, and narrative authority. By transforming Draupadi from a silent participant into the author of her own story, Divakaruni dismantles patriarchal assumptions embedded within the epic tradition. The novel demonstrates that resistance begins when marginalized individuals reclaim the right to speak, remember, and define themselves. In doing so, it reimagines mythology as a space where women's voices reshape history and challenge long-established structures of power.

Traditionally, myths have often been regarded as sacred narratives whose meanings are fixed and unquestionable. Divakaruni rejects this assumption by presenting mythology as an evolving cultural discourse open to reinterpretation. Her retelling illustrates that every generation revisits inherited stories according to its own social and ideological concerns. Instead of merely reproducing the events of the Mahabharata, she reconstructs them through Draupadi's consciousness, encouraging readers to reconsider accepted notions of heroism, morality, and justice. Divakaruni therefore uses mythology not as an escape from reality but as a framework through which contemporary readers can critically examine persistent forms of gender discrimination.

The novel also contributes to contemporary discussions of identity politics by emphasizing the importance of narrative ownership. Modern literary theory increasingly recognizes that history is shaped by those who possess the authority to tell stories. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own life, Divakaruni challenges traditional literary hierarchies and demonstrates that alternative perspectives can transform collective understanding of the past. The novel's enduring relevance also lies in its universal appeal. While deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions, Draupadi's struggles with identity, love, duty, ambition, and selfhood transcend geographical and historical boundaries. Divakaruni thus transforms an ancient epic heroine into a universally relevant literary figure whose journey speaks to contemporary debates about equality, freedom, and human dignity.

*The Palace of Illusions* illustrates that mythology is not a static record of the past but a living tradition continually reshaped through new interpretations. By recovering Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal readings of the Mahabharata and demonstrates that literature possesses the power to redefine cultural memory. The novel encourages readers to question inherited narratives, acknowledge the experiences of marginalized women, and recognize that the reinterpretation of myth remains an essential practice for creating more inclusive understandings of history and society. Through this feminist reconstruction of Draupadi, Divakaruni affirms that the voices once silenced within mythology continue to inspire contemporary struggles for justice, equality, and selfhood.

The study has demonstrated that Divakaruni employs feminist revisionist mythology to reconstruct Draupadi's identity beyond conventional representations. Through her exploration of female agency, selfhood, desire, resistance, and narrative authority, the novel exposes the gendered power structures that govern both mythology and society. Draupadi's persistent questioning of patriarchal customs, her refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice, and her continuous search for identity collectively redefine the meaning of heroism. Rather than celebrating physical conquest alone, *The Palace of Illusions* presents courage as the ability to preserve dignity, voice, and moral conviction despite systemic oppression.

Divakaruni's use of first-person narration transforms storytelling itself into an act of empowerment. By allowing Draupadi to interpret her own life, the novel illustrates that reclaiming narrative authority is essential for reconstructing identity and challenging dominant historical discourses. This narrative strategy aligns with contemporary feminist literary criticism, which emphasizes the importance of recovering women's voices within canonical texts. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates that mythology is neither static nor immutable. Instead, it remains a living cultural tradition that acquires new meanings through reinterpretation. Through Draupadi's reclaimed voice, Divakaruni invites readers to envision mythology as a transformative space where women are recognized not as passive participants in history but as active creators of meaning and agents of social change.

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