

**THE FEMININE VOICE OF *THE MAHABHARATA*: DRAUPADI IN  
CHITRA BAJERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS***

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**Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a feminist reimagining of the Mahabharata, presenting Draupadi as a complex, self-reflective woman rather than a mere symbol of victimhood and sacrifice. Through her voice, Divakaruni delves into Draupadi's innermost thoughts, desires, and emotional turmoil, exploring the struggles of a woman confined by the rigid expectations of a patriarchal society. While traditionally portrayed as a passive figure enduring hardship for the sake of duty, Draupadi in this retelling becomes an active force in shaping her own destiny, challenging the societal structures of gender and power. The novel reveals Draupadi's unspoken love for Karna, her quest for self-identity, and her yearning for autonomy in a world that diminishes her **power**. Divakaruni transforms Draupadi from a passive character into a central, feminist voice within *The Mahabharata*, giving her the space to express her pain, desires, and resistance. This reinterpretation critiques the patriarchal underpinnings of the original epic, while also offering a broader commentary on women's ongoing struggle for self-determination, identity and respect in a male-dominated world.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Reimagining, Self-Identity, Feminist Critique

**Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Voice of Empowerment and Identity**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a celebrated Indian-American author, known for her insightful exploration of themes like identity, immigration, cultural heritage,

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and self-discovery. Her work has had a profound impact on diaspora literature, particularly in giving voice to marginalized communities. Divakaruni's storytelling tackles issues such as domestic violence and cultural displacement, offering narratives that resonate deeply with readers. Her ability to bridge cultural divides and her compelling literary style have earned her widespread acclaim. Through vivid, empathetic character development, Divakaruni highlights the personal and cultural struggles of immigrants, particularly women, creating stories that inspire, challenge, and empower. By reflecting on the human condition, Divakaruni invites readers to explore deeper questions of belonging, identity, and self-empowerment in a rapidly changing world.

### **Draupadi: A Complex, Empowered Protagonist**

*The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008, draws inspiration from the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, blending reality with myth and infusing it with an enchanting sense of magic. In the novel, Divakaruni offers a captivating feminist reimaging of the *Mahabharata*, told through the eyes of Draupadi, its central female protagonist. Divakaruni, in *The Palace of Illusions*, beckons readers into the intricate and enchanting universe of Draupadi, declaring with great authority, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into." (xv) This retelling shifts the focus from the epic's male-dominated narrative, emphasizing Draupadi's strength, intellect, and autonomy in a patriarchal world. Rather than a mere victim, Draupadi is portrayed as a complex, empowered woman navigating her roles as wife, daughter, and political figure. Throughout the novel, she grapples with issues of love, duty, identity, and destiny, emerging as a symbol of resilience and defiance.

### **Draupadi's Displacement: A Journey from Celestial to Mortal**

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's birth from fire symbolizes her forced exile from the celestial realm to Earth. Before her birth, she resided in Devlok with her brother, but at the call of King Drupad, they were brought to Earth. Despite her divine origins, Draupadi is immediately treated as an unwanted outsider. Drupad's yajna was meant to produce a son to avenge his insult by Drona, but instead, he received both a son and a daughter. Draupadi, born with the burden of changing the course of history (5), yet treated as an "enforced" child. Her nurse, Dhai Ma, often refers to Draupadi as "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (1), highlighting her alienation. Like an immigrant torn from her homeland, Draupadi finds herself rejected by her new world.

### **Between Worlds: Draupadi's Struggle with her Identity**

*The Palace of Illusions* critiques the patriarchal systems that reduce women to objects supporting male pride. Despite her intelligence and strength, Draupadi is

still bound by gender roles, trained only in the arts while denied opportunities to pursue martial or political power. Her desire to master the martial arts, thwarted by societal norms, underscores the limitations imposed on women. As she reflects, "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". (6) Illustrating her frustration with the patriarchal constraints on her autonomy. Divakaruni's retelling presents Draupadi as a strong, complex woman who challenges these norms, particularly through her relationships with the Pandavas and Karna, highlighting the themes of love, loyalty, and destiny in the Mahabharata. In an interview, Chitra says that, "Women should always be strong – we hope we can be strong, but when we are not, there should be a space for us. For centuries, it's okay for a man to do all kinds of things, but for women not so much". (87)

### **The Prophecy: Fate and Fear**

One day, Draupadi overhears a conversation about a sage who can predict the future. Driven by a desire to know her destiny, she persuades her nurse, Dhai Ma, to seek the sage's counsel. The prophecy reveals a future filled with destruction, including the deaths of her sons and brother. "I lamented the tragic fate that seemed to be my inevitable path." Along with the sorrowful prophecy, the sage speaks of a magical palace that will one day be hers but will soon be lost, a transient possession. Desperate to change her fate, Draupadi struggles to come to terms with the grim predictions and is given a new name, Panchaali, marking the start of her transformation.

### **The Palace: A Dream of Belonging**

Despite the unsettling prophecy of multiple husbands, Draupadi becomes fixated on the idea of the wondrous palace she is destined to inherit. She dreams of it often, longing for a sense of belonging that has eluded her. "...I thought also of the palace the spirits had promised me. Most magical, they'd called it. I wondered how I would ever gain such a palace" (42). She imagines it vividly, I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flirting among jasmines, and in the midst of it...Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel-studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (7)

This palace represents not just her future but a place where she might finally feel at home, symbolizing her deepest desires for self-fulfillment and belonging.

### **The Longing for Karna and Forced Displacement**

Draupadi harbours a deep affection for Karna, a love that remains unspoken, but is manipulated by Krishna into publicly insulting him at a crucial moment. Draupadi finds herself captivated upon gazing at Karna's portrait. She describes him as the man who had caught her attention seated to Duryodhana's right ..... older than the prince, with a stern, austere expression. His slender frame was erect, exuding an air of vigilance, as though he understood the world's inherent dangers. Though he seemed utterly solitary in the court, he carried an undeniable presence. His only accessories were a set of oddly patterned gold armour and gold earrings, neither of which I had previously seen. His eyes were filled with a grief from long ago. I was drawn into them. My irritability vanished. I had lost interest in seeing Arjun's portrait. I was more interested in how those eyes would appear if the man grinned. I had an absurd desire to be the cause of his smile. (69)

Despite the warmth and understanding she feels for Karna, Draupadi follows Krishna's advice, driven by the larger forces of destiny. Later, in the solitude of her thoughts, she regrets her actions, lamenting, "Karna would never have let you suffer like this" (99). This moment of self-reflection marks her second forced displacement, where her personal desires are once again overshadowed by duty and fate. She realizes that her personal longing for love and connection with Karna has been eclipsed by the political and social obligations thrust upon her, leaving her emotionally isolated. This conflict between love and duty shapes Draupadi's complex journey, as she continuously navigates the tension between her inner desires and the expectations placed upon her.

#### **A Life of Displacement and Defiance**

Draupadi's long-sought revenge materializes in the bloodshed of the Kurukshetra War. While it brings fleeting satisfaction, her emotions soon shift. After Karna's death, she feels a sense of emptiness, realizing vengeance offers no true peace. As the war progresses, her earlier fervour wanes, and she longs for its end. When her sons and brother die, she feels responsible for the destruction caused by her thirst for vengeance. Despite their victory, the Pandavas, too, feel hollow—devoid of loved ones to share their triumph. Even with Parikshit to carry on their legacy, the void left by their losses is irreplaceable, and they, too, feel defeated. Ultimately, Draupadi regrets the path her life has taken. Throughout her life, Draupadi faces constant displacement, with her desires suppressed by external forces. In a moment of reflection, she confesses,

I consider my life. What was it that made me joyful? What made me experience peace? ... I'd ridden all these years, delighted one moment, distraught the

next. Certainly none of the men or women I'd been close to had given me that type of joy-nor I them, if I were to admit the truth. Even my palace with its strange and beautiful fantasies, the palace that in some way I'd loved more than any of my husbands, the palace that was my greatest pride, had ultimately brought me only sorrow. (352)

Despite the sacrifices and hardships, Draupadi remains a powerful symbol of resilience and defiance against the structures that try to limit her.

### **Empowerment and the Struggle against Patriarchy**

Draupadi's journey critiques the historical exploitation of women. In the famous gambling scene, when she is humiliated before the court, no one defends her, "I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered saree around me, I demanded help from my husbands..." (191). Despite these tribulations, Draupadi evolves into a symbol of empowerment, questioning the societal norms that oppress women. Agarwal opines "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" (67).

### **Transcendence and True Identity**

Throughout her life, Draupadi yearns for love and belonging, but never finds lasting fulfillment. She associates "home" with deep love and connection, but her relationships and material desires prove fleeting. Her infatuation with Karna fades, revealing the transient nature of her passions. Yet, on her deathbed, she discovers that Krishna's love is eternal, "He loved me even when I behaved in a most unloved manner ..... It healed me. If what I felt for Karna was a cingeing fire, Krishna's love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape" (356). As Draupadi nears death, she questions Krishna's divinity, unsure how a mortal like herself could be loved by someone so divine. However, in her final moments, she transcends her earthly form and embraces her true self as Panchaali, unbound by ego or gender, "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (360). She finds her true home, not in a physical place, but in the divine love of Krishna. Her ultimate discovery of her true home highlights the process of self-rediscovery, where she finds peace in Krishna's eternal love.

### **Struggles with Identity and Patriarchal Expectations**

Draupadi's life is shaped by patriarchal norms that silence her voice and restrict her identity. Her name, "Draupadi," reflects her lack of independent identity, and even in moments of humiliation, she is expected to suffer in silence. Despite this, she rebels against these limitations, seeking knowledge and autonomy, while

challenging traditional gender roles. Draupadi's journey critiques the gendered power structures that silence women. After her public humiliation, she recognizes the importance of self-identity and standing up for herself, stating, "A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day ...." (195). Her marriage to the Pandavas, arranged by Kunti, disregards her feelings, and Draupadi's distress at being treated as an object highlights her struggle for autonomy in a world that continually silences her.

### **Feminist Reinterpretation of *The Mahabharata***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines *The Mahabharata* from a feminist perspective, centering Draupadi as a complex, multidimensional character. The novel explores her emotional depth, internal conflicts, and defiance of patriarchal norms, transforming her from a passive symbol of virtue into a woman asserting her power and seeking personal fulfillment. It critiques the historical marginalization of women, urging a reevaluation of gender roles and societal pressures. Ultimately, the novel calls for a more inclusive society where women can freely assert their voices and destinies, offering a fresh perspective on female strength and struggle within a patriarchal world.

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