

Reimagining Myth and Feminine Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a modern retelling of the Indian epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the most complex female characters in Indian mythology. The novel reconstructs the traditional narrative by giving voice to Draupadi's inner thoughts, emotions, desires, and struggles. Through this reinterpretation, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal structures embedded in mythology and highlights issues of gender identity, power, love, revenge, and self-discovery. This article examines how the novel transforms myth into a contemporary feminist narrative and explores Draupadi's journey as a woman negotiating duty, destiny, and individuality. The study also analyses the narrative style, symbolism, and characterization employed by Divakaruni to create a meaningful connection between ancient mythology and modern feminist concerns.

Keywords: Mythology, Feminism, Draupadi, Identity, Patriarchy, Mahabharata, Retelling

Introduction

Indian mythology has always occupied a significant place in literature and cultural imagination. Among the ancient Indian epics, the Mahabharata stands as one of the most influential texts, offering moral, philosophical, political, and social insights. Traditionally, the epic is narrated from a predominantly male perspective, focusing on heroic deeds, war, kingship, and dharma. Women characters often remain confined within the boundaries of patriarchal expectations. However, modern writers have attempted to reinterpret these myths and provide new perspectives to the silenced female voices within the epics.

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is one such remarkable reinterpretation. Published in 2008, the novel retells the story of the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi, also known as Panchaali. By making Draupadi the narrator, Divakaruni transforms a mythological tale into an exploration of feminine consciousness, agency, and resistance. The novel allows readers to understand the emotional and psychological dimensions of Draupadi's life that are largely absent in the traditional epic.

This article examines how Divakaruni reconstructs mythology to foreground women's experiences. It also analyses the themes of identity, gender discrimination, power, love, revenge, and destiny in the novel. Through Draupadi's voice, the author not only humanizes a legendary character but also creates a bridge between ancient and modern concerns regarding women's roles in society.

Draupadi as the Central Voice

One of the most striking features of *The Palace of Illusions* is the narrative perspective. Unlike the traditional Mahabharata, where Draupadi appears mainly through the observations of male characters, Divakaruni places her at the center of the story. The novel begins with Draupadi's birth from the sacrificial fire and follows her journey through childhood, marriage, humiliation, exile, war, and eventual death.

From an early age, Draupadi experiences discrimination because of her gender. Her father, King Drupad, values her brother Dhri more highly because he is destined to become a warrior. Draupadi is expected to remain obedient and confined within traditional feminine roles. However, she refuses to accept these limitations silently. Her curiosity, intelligence, and desire for freedom distinguish her from conventional female characters.

Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a woman who constantly questions the customs and traditions imposed upon her. She desires education, independence, and recognition beyond her beauty. Her voice reflects the struggles faced by many women who seek individuality within patriarchal societies. Through Draupadi's narration, the novel exposes the emotional burden carried by women who are denied agency over their own lives.

The first-person narration also allows readers to understand Draupadi's inner conflicts. She is neither portrayed as a perfect heroine nor as a passive victim. Instead, she emerges as a deeply human character with strengths, flaws, desires, jealousy, anger, and vulnerability. This realistic portrayal contributes significantly to the feminist reinterpretation of mythology.

Feminism and Patriarchal Society

A major theme in *The Palace of Illusions* is feminism. Divakaruni critiques the patriarchal values embedded within the epic tradition. Draupadi's life is largely controlled by men—her father

decides her future, her marriage becomes a political arrangement, and her humiliation in the Kaurava court results from male rivalry and ego.

One of the most powerful episodes in the novel is Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers. Although she initially expects to marry Arjuna, she is forced to become the wife of all five brothers because of Kunti's command. Draupadi's consent is never considered. This incident symbolizes the lack of autonomy granted to women in patriarchal societies.

Divakaruni emphasizes Draupadi's emotional pain and confusion during this period. While the traditional epic often presents the polyandrous marriage as a matter of destiny, the novel highlights its psychological consequences. Draupadi struggles to maintain her identity while fulfilling the expectations of being the common wife of five men.

Another important feminist moment occurs during the infamous dice game. Draupadi is dragged into the royal court and publicly humiliated after Yudhishtira loses her in gambling. In the traditional epic, this event demonstrates the moral decline of society. In Divakaruni's retelling, the scene becomes a powerful critique of women's objectification. Draupadi questions the legality and morality of her treatment. She refuses to remain silent and demands justice.

Her courage in confronting the elders of the court reveals her strength and intelligence. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi not merely as a victim but as a woman who resists oppression and challenges patriarchal authority. Through her defiance, the novel presents a strong feminist message regarding women's dignity and self-respect.

The Theme of Identity and Selfhood

Identity is another major concern in the novel. Throughout her life, Draupadi searches for a sense of self beyond the labels imposed upon her. She is known as daughter, wife, queen, and mother, but she struggles to discover her own individuality.

The palace of illusions itself symbolizes this search for identity. The magnificent palace built by the Pandavas represents beauty, ambition, and illusion. It reflects Draupadi's desire for power and fulfillment, yet it also reminds readers that worldly glory is temporary and deceptive.

Draupadi's inner conflicts reveal the tension between personal desires and social expectations. She desires love and emotional connection, particularly with Karna, whom she secretly admires. However, social rules and political obligations prevent her from expressing these emotions openly. Her suppressed feelings contribute to her loneliness and dissatisfaction.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi as an emotionally complex woman challenges the idealized image of mythological heroines. Instead of depicting her as entirely self-sacrificing, the author presents her as someone who longs for recognition, affection, and freedom. This realistic exploration of female psychology makes the character relatable to modern readers.

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The novel also explores how identity is shaped by destiny. Draupadi is repeatedly reminded that she was born to change history and bring destruction upon the Kauravas. Yet she questions whether individuals truly control their lives or merely follow predetermined paths. This philosophical conflict between destiny and free will adds depth to the narrative.

Love, Friendship, and Emotional Conflict

Divakaruni enriches the narrative by exploring Draupadi's emotional relationships. Her bond with Krishna is one of the most meaningful aspects of the novel. Krishna acts as her friend, guide, and spiritual companion. Unlike other men in her life, he understands her thoughts and emotions without judgment.

Krishna's presence provides emotional stability to Draupadi during moments of suffering and confusion. Their friendship reflects mutual respect and spiritual connection rather than romantic attachment. Through this relationship, Divakaruni presents the possibility of emotional companionship based on understanding and equality.

Another important aspect of the novel is Draupadi's attraction toward Karna. In the traditional Mahabharata, this emotional dimension is not significantly explored. Divakaruni imagines Draupadi's hidden admiration for Karna and uses it to highlight the conflict between desire and duty.

Karna represents a life that Draupadi could never attain. Her attraction toward him symbolizes her longing for emotional freedom and genuine connection. However, social barriers and personal pride prevent them from uniting. This unfulfilled relationship intensifies the tragic dimensions of the novel.

The relationships between Draupadi and the Pandavas are also portrayed with complexity. Each husband has distinct characteristics, and Draupadi shares different emotional dynamics with them. While she respects Yudhishtira's wisdom and admires Arjuna's heroism, she often feels emotionally neglected. The novel thus portrays marriage not merely as a sacred institution but also as a source of emotional compromise and struggle.

Mythology and Modern Relevance

One of the reasons for the popularity of *The Palace of Illusions* is its contemporary relevance. Although based on ancient mythology, the novel addresses issues that remain significant in modern society, such as gender inequality, female agency, emotional repression, and the struggle for identity.

Divakaruni's language and narrative style make the myth accessible to contemporary readers. She combines poetic imagery with psychological realism, enabling readers to connect emotionally with

the characters. The novel transforms mythological figures into relatable human beings with personal fears, ambitions, and insecurities.

The reinterpretation of Draupadi's story also reflects the broader literary movement of revisiting myths from marginalized perspectives. By centering a female voice, Divakaruni challenges the male-dominated structure of traditional storytelling. This approach encourages readers to question accepted narratives and reconsider the role of women in history and literature.

The novel is particularly significant in feminist literature because it demonstrates how mythology can be reimagined to address present-day concerns. Draupadi's struggles with autonomy, respect, and identity continue to resonate with women across cultures and generations.

Symbolism in the Novel

Divakaruni uses several symbols throughout the novel to deepen its thematic significance. Fire is one of the most important symbols. Draupadi's birth from fire represents passion, strength, destruction, and transformation. Fire also symbolizes her intense emotions and the social upheaval associated with her destiny.

The palace itself is another major symbol. The "Palace of Illusions" reflects the deceptive nature of worldly power and material success. Though the palace appears magnificent, it ultimately cannot protect the Pandavas from suffering and destruction. It symbolizes the fragile and temporary nature of human achievements.

The dice game symbolizes the dangers of greed, pride, and patriarchal arrogance. Draupadi's humiliation during this event exposes the moral corruption of society and the vulnerability of women within male power structures.

Divakaruni's use of symbolism enhances the emotional and philosophical depth of the narrative. The symbols connect personal experiences with larger social and existential questions.

Narrative Style and Language

Divakaruni's narrative style is lyrical, emotional, and introspective. The first-person narration creates intimacy between Draupadi and the readers. The language is rich with imagery and emotional depth, allowing readers to experience Draupadi's joys, fears, and frustrations.

The author skillfully blends mythology with modern sensibilities. While the story retains its epic background, the dialogues and emotions feel contemporary and relatable. This balance between tradition and modernity contributes to the novel's appeal among diverse readers.

The novel also uses descriptive imagery to create vivid settings, including royal palaces, forests, battlefields, and mystical spaces. These descriptions contribute to the magical and immersive atmosphere of the narrative.

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Divakaruni's reinterpretation does not attempt to replace the original Mahabharata; instead, it complements the epic by presenting an alternative perspective. Her narrative style encourages empathy and critical reflection.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a powerful reinterpretation of the Mahabharata that foregrounds the voice of Draupadi and re-examines mythology through a feminist lens. By presenting Draupadi as an intelligent, emotional, and questioning individual, the novel challenges traditional representations of women in epic literature.

The novel explores themes of identity, patriarchy, love, destiny, and selfhood with psychological depth and emotional intensity. Through Draupadi's experiences, Divakaruni critiques social structures that deny women autonomy and dignity. At the same time, the novel celebrates female resilience, courage, and the desire for self-definition.

The Palace of Illusions remains significant because it bridges the gap between ancient mythology and modern feminist discourse. It invites readers to revisit familiar stories from new perspectives and recognize the importance of marginalized voices in literature and history. Through its imaginative storytelling and profound emotional insight, the novel continues to inspire critical discussion about gender, identity, and the enduring relevance of myth.

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